

# THE GREAT SENTINEL

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A STUDY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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— *By*  
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*In memory*  
*of*  
*My Uncle*  
**JOGESH CHANDRA SEN GUPTA**

## PREFACE

The essays presented here aim at a critical appraisal of Rabindranath's work in poetry, drama and fiction. The first two chapters are biographical. The biography, however, is not exhaustive nor, perhaps, can it claim complete factual exactitude. Criticism, not biography, is my theme, and I have emphasized only those incidents in the poet's life which have seemed to me to be significant in a judgment of his work.

In the critical chapter I have generally confined myself to English translations of Rabindranath's works, although I have utilized my knowledge of untranslated Bengali works to make my interpretations fuller. The consequent limitation of range will make the book more readable for the non-Bengali reader, and will, I think, be advantageous to the Bengali reader also. The bulk of Rabindranath's writings—almost all his major poems, dramas and stories—have been translated into English, and all criticism that wants to avoid amorphousness, must be selective. The English translations afforded me an excellent anthology, and I gladly availed myself of it. I only wish that I had also translations of *Chokher-Bali* and *Shesher-Kavita* to draw upon.

I have made use of the translations published by Messrs Macmillan & Co., Ltd., the Visva-Bharati and Sri Bhabani Bhattacharyya (*The Golden Boat*) and must acknowledge by indebtedness to them. My obligations to other writers are indicated in the appropriate contexts where they are quoted or discussed. I should like specially to mention my teacher Dr Srikumar Banerjee, whose writings and discourses have deeply influenced my judgments, not the least in those places where I have ventured

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## CHAPTER I

### THE GROWTH OF A POET

#### I

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Calcutta on the 7th May 1861, the youngest but one child of Debendranath Tagore. The father was a man remarkable in many ways. Rabindranath himself says, "My father I saw very seldom ; he was away a great deal, but his presence pervaded the whole house and was one of the deepest influences on my life..." Debendranath was popularly called *Maharshi* or the great saint for his deep piety, his severe adherence to moral principles in conduct and for his stout advocacy of the worship of the Invisible God, which meant a rejection of the idolatry prevalent amongst the Hindus. As a discussion of his many-sided activities will take us far away from the biography of his son, we shall emphasize here only two aspects of the *Maharshi's* life. About five years before the birth of the poet, the Maharshi had left all his earthly pursuits, and after wandering about from place to place, had decided on settling in the Simla hills where he could immerse himself in religious contemplation, far off from worldly cares and temptations. After about two years' sojourn, he was one day watching a beautiful hill stream which was flowing towards the plains. The *Maharshi* realized that though in course of its downward journey it might be polluted with dirt, yet it would fulfil its mission only by fertilizing the earth. There, in the movement of the stream, the *Maharshi* saw the ideal of his life, too. The deliverance that might come through rejection of worldly life appeared to him to be sheer vanity. He felt that if he had learnt any divine truth he must live it in practical life, in the welter of earthly endeavours. He left the hills and

once more became a man among men, seeking the bliss of eternity in the midst of temporal activities. Here, in this achievement of freedom through bondage, we have an anticipation of one of the most significant ideas of Rabindranath's poetry.

The *Maharshi* was a believer in the One Invisible God whom he found in the teachings of the Upanisads, but he differed from the monistic interpretation of the scriptures made by the *Advaita* school of philosophy. The *Advaitin* believes in the absolute identity of the individual self (*Jiva*) and God, but the *Maharshi* reacted strongly from this philosophy in which the individual is submerged in the Absolute. His biographer Ajitkumar Chakravarti has shown that his religion, which had a good deal of eclecticism, underwent a gradual evolution. At first, he argued that the Absolute is as different from the individual consciousness as the individual consciousness is from matter, and in positing this difference he seems to have been influenced by the philosophy of Descartes. "We had no faith," he wrote, "in Vedanta philosophy, because Shankaracharya seeks to prove therein that Brahma and all created beings are one and the same." Later on he reached a more dynamic conception of the relation between the individual and the Absolute and realized the dependence of the former on the latter. In the final stage of his development as a theologian, the gulf is further bridged and he says, "This universe is the outcome of perfect truth. This universe is relative truth, its Creator is the Truth of Truth, the Absolute Truth." In his book on Brahma Dharma, there is no place for the doctrines of *Advaitavada* (Monism), *Avataravada* (Incarnation) and *Mayavada* (Illusion). In the *Maharshi's* religion, the individual soul and God are separate entities, they are like friends, but the difference between them is not insuperable. God is the Supreme Spirit, and the world is the result of a spontaneous overflow of His creative energy. He wills it, and it is there. This attitude to the world and God, which has a tinge of Vaishnavite thought

and religion—for the early Tagores were devout Vaishnavas—reaches forward to Rabindranath's philosophy of life \*

## II

Who were these Tagores and what was their culture? The Tagore family became wealthy in the days of the East India Company in Calcutta, as merchants and Zamindars, and the poet's grandfather Prince Dwarkanath, who was famous for the splendour of his living, was a friend of Rammohan Ray, the founder of the Brahma religion and "the first internationally minded man of the nineteenth century" in India. The Tagores were Brahmins, but orthodox Brahmins demurred to accept them as belonging to their fold, because they were called *Piralis*. There is difference

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\* A correspondent makes the following comment

'Was the *Maharshi's* influence conducive to the development of poetical genius or was it an obstacle? It has been my impression that the *Maharshi* as well as the religion he represented was much too puritanical and ethical in character to have a benign influence on the emotional development of any budding poet. The best that these influences might have helped to sprout was the poems in *Dharma-Sangit* (*Religious Songs*) but not the lyrics in *Gitanjali* and *Gitanjaliya*. These latter lyrics are based on a conception of the mystical relation between the poet and the Absolute, which is found nowhere in Indian literature. The spirit which is representative of this attitude has, I think, found a very clear expression in the following lines

'I have met thee where the night touches the edge of the day,  
where the light startles the darkness into dawn, and the waves carry  
the kiss of the one shore to the other'

Can you tell me where the poet derived this sentiment from? This certainly was not the gift of Brahminism or a heritage from the *Maharshi*. It seems to me that the mysterious psychology of *Gitanjali* cannot be unravelled much less can it be traced to the influences of any particular brand of Hinduism."

The above comment, striking as it is, cannot be accepted without demur. Although the *Maharshi* was a theologian and had very little of the exuberant imagination possessed by his son, it is undeniable that the philosophy which formed the background to Rabindranath's poetry had its roots in his father's teaching. Says Miss Evelyn Underhill "As the poems of Rabindranath Tagore are examples, unique in our time, rare in any time, of this synthetic mysticism, a whole and balanced attitude to the infinite, transcendent and immanent reality of God as they speak to us out of life itself, yet not out of the thin and restless plane of existence which we call by that august name, so that the same depth and richness of view, which escapes alike extreme Absolutism and extreme Immanentism, which embraces the universal without ever losing touch of the personal, is found to be the governing intuition of his father's life."

of opinion about the exact meaning of the word *Pirali*, but tradition has it that once upon a time they had been contaminated by contact with Muslims, and that is why although they were not outcasts, orthodox people would look down upon them as a class apart. The Tagores were Vaishnavas in their religious outlook, inclining to vegetarianism in diet, they were enlightened, and Prince Dwarakanath, who had assisted Rammohan Ray in social reform, had visited England where he died in 1846.

Fifteen years after the Prince's death, his famous grandson was born in Calcutta at their Jorasanko house. In the course of a lecture in China, Rabindranath refers to the significance of the age in which he was born and the part taken by members of his family in the three revolutionary movements which stirred the country in those days. The first movement was religious, and its founder was Rammohan Ray, who carried on a ceaseless war on superstitions and proclaimed the oneness of God. It has already been noted that one of the leaders of this movement for spiritual revival was *Maharshi* Debendranath Tagore, the poet's father. The second movement was in the field of literature where Bankimchandra rescued Bengali language from the morass of dead forms, brought a new critical attitude and made Bengali a vehicle for the expression of ebullient imagination that would brook no discipline imposed from the outside. The third movement might be called National, it was partly political and partly cultural.

"It was a voice of indignation at the humiliation constantly heaped upon us by people who were not Oriental" and while not opposed to the importation of Western thought, it discouraged indiscriminate rejection of traditional Indian culture and habits. This movement is reflected in the life of the *Maharshi* whom many of his countrymen thought as bad as a Christian but who, more than any one else in his day, emphasized the study of the Upanisads and spared no pains to stem the tide of proselytizing Christianity in Bengal. Of his sons, the eldest Dwijendranath (1840-1926)



was profoundly learned in philosophy and mathematics and expressed his speculations in a work called *Swapna prayan* (*Dream Journey*), and the second Satyendranath (1842-1923), the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service, was noted for his wide scholarship in Indian and European literatures. Another brother Jyotirindranath, of whom more will be said later on, was a man of deep culture and versatile tastes. The *Maharshi's* eldest daughter Saudamini was one of the earliest pupils of the newly founded Bethune School.

### III

Into this atmosphere of culture, both Eastern and Western, Rabindranath was born, and in the Jorasanko house, which was always humming with the noise of people who were busy singing songs, writing verses or discussing theological, philosophical and literary problems, he passed his boyhood. He has himself told the story of his early years in his own inimitable language in *My Reminiscences* and *My Boyhood Days* to which the curious reader will turn for a full account of his boyhood and youth. His mother was more or less an invalid, and he was looked after chiefly by the servants who did not allow him to go outside the house. These early years he sums up by saying that the period of the Slave Dynasty in the history of India was not a happy one, and that the same comment might be made of this portion of his life, too. "From the first time I can remember," he says in another place, "I was passionately fond of Nature", and when as a child he was confined within the pack of buildings at Jorasanko, he would yearn for the outer world of nature and man lying beyond him.

Rabindranath's education began early, and he was put into various schools, but as he did not do any useful work, he was sent to London at the age of seventeen, and there he studied for a time in the University of London under Professor Henry Morley. Of his education it may be said

that he was at school in Calcutta and London, but he was almost wholly self taught, this process of education having started almost as soon as he had his first spelling exercises. All learners know that after the alphabet, there are lessons in the formation of words which are made with permutations and combinations of letters. After wading like other beginners through these meaningless jumbles in a common place Primer, he one day came across a line that may be translated as follows "It rains, the leaves tremble." He found that these words were bound together by an inner unity of meaning, and they brought to him a vision of pattering rain and tremulous leaves. This discovery came to him with the shock of a new revelation to which he has made many references in his works. The poet, who, later on, would express, through his writings, the lessons of unity and harmony, was struck even as a child by the central meaning which bound together the words in "It rains, the leaves tremble." Thus an elementary lesson in the language became the gateway through which the poet learnt to apprehend one of the deepest truths of his life.\*

Of his experience at schools in Calcutta, he speaks with unconcealed disgust, and for only one of his teachers, Professor Henry Morley of London, he expresses genuine admiration. He compared schools to factories and the periods of time he spent there he described as terms of penal servitude in the Andaman Islands. The *Maharshi's* third son Hemendranath (1844-1884), who was in charge of the education of Rabindranath and two other boys, made elaborate arrangements for the training of Rabindranath and his other wards, studies of all sorts—science, literature, music and painting—being heaped upon them. In later life, the poet confessed that much of this learning had been lost upon him, comparing himself to a leaky boat or a losing concern. But there is one thing about the education

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\* *The Religion of Man* pp 95-96. In *My Reminiscences* (p 4) the poet lays emphasis on the beauty of the rhyme in the sentence, and calls it the first poem of the Arch Poet.

Hemendranath gave him to which reference should be made. It was the custom in Bengal then—and it is the custom even now—to begin teaching boys and girls English almost as soon as they would be given elementary lessons in Bengali, and until very recent times English was the medium for teaching History, Geography, Mathematics and the sciences. To this Hemendranath was opposed, he would take his wards through advanced courses in Bengali, which would be the medium for teaching sciences and other subjects, before making them learn English. Even if Rabindranath had not had this early grounding in Bengali, he would in all probability have become the great poet that he is, but this emphasis on the mother tongue when the order of the day was to give primacy to English must have had its share in framing his character, of which one of the most prominent traits was consciousness of self respect.

#### IV

Rabindranath went to England in 1878 and returned in 1880. He again left for England in 1881 with the intention of studying law but changed his plans and returned from Madras. There was no further attempt to "educate" him, and he had in the mean time showed considerable promise as a writer. In 1882, he brought out a book of poems called *Sandhya Sangit* (*Evening Songs*), and soon after its publication he received a signal mark of approbation. At the wedding of Rameshchandra Datta's eldest daughter, Bankimchandra hailed him as the rising sun in the literary firmament. The most dominant influences on the poet were his brother Jyotirindranath (1848-1925) and Jyotirindranath's wife. Jyotirindranath was himself a daring experimenter in everything, he would as easily float a new commercial venture as compose a new tune and would make his wife cast off *Pardah* with as much facility as he would devise a new dress for Bengali gentlemen. In his dealings with Rabindranath he did not allow differ

ence in years to create any barrier, rather he encouraged his brother, who was younger by more than twelve years, to think and feel in his own way "My brother Jyotirindra" says the poet in *My Reminiscences*, "unreservedly let me go my own way to self knowledge" Contact with this man who was himself unconventional and loved to see un conventionality in others helped the poet also to get rid of an ingrained diffidence and shyness

Jyotirindranath's wife exercised a deeper influence than even her husband and may be considered the most valued friend of the poet who, in later life, counted innumerable admirers and disciples in both hemispheres After the death of the poet's mother in 1875 she was something of a mother to the young boy, she made him her playmate in her girlish pastimes, and when Rabindranath budded into a poet, she was his companion and his first discerning critic She was a great lover of literature and pointed out to Rabindranath—what many persons were slow to recognize—the originality in the poetry of Viharilal Chakravarti She would subject to severe scrutiny all that Rabindranath wrote, and saved him from the literary artist's besetting sin—vanity and want of self criticism This lady died in 1884, and in her loss the poet made an acquaintance with death which left an enduring impression on his mind, its blow, says the poet 'has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an everlengthening chain of tears Jyotirindranath's wife reappears, transformed by a poet's imagination, in some of his best poems and stories

The influence exercised by Jyotirindranath and his wife was so all pervasive during the early period of Rabindranath's life that once when the husband and wife had left home for a long journey, the poet felt that it was now open to him to write as he liked and he naturally gained freedom from the style they had imposed on him, thus showing that the deepest influence in the making of a poet is the poet's own self

Of literary influences mention must be made of

Viharilal Chakravarti who was never acclaimed as a major poet but in whom Rabindranath and his sister in law discovered genuine lyrical inspiration Viharilal impressed him by his metrical experiments and may have helped him also in forming the concept of *Jivan Devata*. A more important influence was Vaishnava lyrical poetry which is remarkable as much for intensity of feeling as for command of daring imagery and freedom of metrical movement. The similarity between Rabindranath's outlook on life and that of the Vaishnava poets will be discussed at a later page. Here it will be enough to draw attention to the impetus that the young poet received from these poems which, full of the freedom and courage of expression, gave him boldness and enabled him to strike a new path for himself in the field of art and poetry.\*

## V

Rabindranath lisped in numbers as the numbers came his first attempts at versification dating back to 1868 when he was barely seven years old. But of his early efforts he was in later life inclined to ignore all that preceded *Evening Songs* (*Sandhya Sangit*) which received the blessing of Bankimchandra and with which, he thought his career as a poet really began. But even this book had been written before the Great Illumination came which gave him a new insight into the universe.

What was this illumination and when and where did it come? In *The Religion of Man* the poet speaks of it as happening in Calcutta when he was eighteen (pp 93-94) but at eighteen he was in England. In a lecture in China he speaks of it as coming to him in a village but in *My*

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\* It may be useful to mention other forces that had so far been acting as formative influences in the making of the poet. Of his teachers reference has already been made to Professor Henry Morley of whom he speaks with great enthusiasm and with whom he studied. Sir Thomas Browne. It is not difficult to find in Rabindranath's reflections on death echoes of Browne's curious musings on the same theme in *Religio Medici* and *Urn Burial*.

*Reminiscences* he again speaks of it as occurring in Calcutta, first dimly at the Jorasanko house and then clearly and emphatically at Sudder Street. But these discrepancies will not be confusing if we remember that although the poet became fully conscious of a new emotion during his stay at Sudder Street (1882) and expressed it in a memorable poem *The Awakening of the Waterfall* (*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*), there were vague stirrings before its full emergence, and possibly the earliest pulsations had come to him even before he left England. What was the nature of this experience, which receives its final expression in *The Awakening of the Waterfall*?

Of what he felt in a village he says in the lecture in China referred to above

"My world of experience seemed to become lightened, and facts that were detached and dim formed a great unity of meaning." At the Jorasanko house one evening—

"The after glow of the sunset combined with the wan twilight in a way which seemed to give the approaching evening a specially wonderful attractiveness for me. Is this uplifting of the cover of triviality from the everyday world, I wondered, due to some magic in the evening light? Never." (*My Reminiscences*)

About his experience at Sudder Street he writes in different places. The following extract from *The Religion of Man* expresses his point of view most effectively

"I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the superpersonal world of man."

Three things stand out as distinctive of the poet's new vision of life. It is the human soul which is the source of creation, but its creative effort leads it away from itself and unites it with the inner life of Nature which, too, is full of human significance. Secondly, this union between

man's expanding consciousness and the spirit of Nature is a source of joy, and it is in this sense of joy springing from a realization of the inner harmony of objects that Rabindranath finds the definition of beauty. Thirdly, this joy or beauty is identical with freedom, for it is by lifting the outer curtain of commonplaceness and triviality that life can explore its real significance.\*

## VI

*The Awakening of the Waterfall* is the most important thing in a new book of poems called *Prabhat Sangit* (*Morning Songs*) which was published in 1884. From now on there was a ceaseless stream of poems, dramas, songs and essays from his pen, and he also gave editorial assistance to such journals as *Bharati* and *Balak*, besides organizing an abortive movement to found an Academy of Bengali literature. The publication of *Prabhat Sangit* was contemporaneous with two important events in his life—his marriage (December 1883) and the death of Jyotirindranath's wife (May 1884).

About a year after his marriage, Rabindranath became the secretary of the Adi Brahma Samaj of which his father was one of the greatest leaders. It is now necessary to draw attention to one significant aspect of the poet's character and work—his attitude to ancient Indian ideals and his relation to the nationalist movement. Although he was a nationalist to the core and joined the second session of the Indian National Congress at which he sang the opening song composed by himself, his enthusiasm was sobered by his critical attitude towards the evils in Hindu society and by acceptance of facts. With his strong faith in the unity of man, he was a sleepless critic of the organization of caste which sets artificial barriers between one set of men and

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\* To C. L. Andrews he said: 'I have felt ever since that this was my goal—to express the fullness of life in its beauty as perfection—if only the veil were withdrawn.' (*Letters To A Friend*)

another, and as the secretary of the Adi Brahma Samaj he introduced what was a bold innovation in those days, he invited non Brahmin preachers to deliver sermons from the pulpit which had hitherto been occupied by Brahmins alone. During these years the neo Hindu nationalists were carrying on a campaign to glorify all that is Indian as a reaction against the impact of Western ideas and one of the extremist leaders of this group Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachuramani went so far as to claim that all the advanced researches of Western science had already been known to the ancient Indian sages. As it was found that many ancient practices were dictated by practical considerations of health, Pandit Sasadhar tried to give fantastic, pseudo-scientific explanations of all our popular superstitions. Bankimchandra Chatterjee did not subscribe to the extravagant claims and fanciful theories advanced by these zealots but as his great name was associated with this movement, Rabindranath entered upon a controversy with him on what should be our attitude to our ancient heritage. The controversy was not carried to the bitter extreme to which such controversies usually lead the combatants, because Rabindranath had great respect for Bankimchandra and Bankimchandra was full of love and admiration for the young poet and thinker. But the part Rabindranath took in this dispute was significant, it showed what line he would take in the social and political questions awaiting him in the future.

From the literary point of view the most important work of this period is the drama *Sanyasi* or *Prakritir Parisodh* (*Nature's Revenge*). *Evening Songs* had revealed the poet in an introspective mood in which he was engrossed in the contemplation of his own heart. *The Awakening of the Waterfall* marked his emergence from what was appropriately described by Mohitchandra Sen as the *Heart Wilderness*. *Nature's Revenge*, which Rabindranath himself regards as the introduction to his subsequent literary work, completes the process started by *The Awakening of the*



*Waterfall and Morning Songs* He would no longer fritter away his powers in a quest of the Infinite in the vague dreamings of his own soul *Sanyasi* is the story of a hermit who, striving to gain a victory over all desires, retired from the world in pursuit of the true knowledge of self He is brought back to mother earth by his love for a little girl, and he comes to realize the Infinite in the midst of finite, human affection The defeat of the *Sanyasi* symbolizes the final emergence of the poet into the open world of rain and sunshine, of human joys and cares

## VII

In 1890 Rabindranath was twenty nine years old—and the father of three children He had established a considerable reputation as poet, story teller, dramatist and essayist, besides composing a large number of songs, as remarkable for originality of substance as for novelty of tunes He was now directed to look after the family estates lying scattered in North Bengal and Orissa For the next few years he established his headquarters at Shelidah (Rajshahi) and made extensive tours around the villages where the family properties lay, living mostly in a house boat This period, which is popularly known as the Shelidah period saw him producing a plentiful harvest of prose and verse, and it was at this time that he became the virtual editor of *Sadhana*, the celebrated monthly magazine which, for some years, was the nucleus of his literary activities Some of his admirers think the Shelidah period to be the richest in his long and distinguished literary career Without making any comment on this claim, we may say that this period was important in his life because it was at this time that he came into intimate contact with the people of Bengal which, in his own opinion, is a network of villages He saw their joys and sorrows at close quarters and understood these villagers in a way he could not have done if he had not come to live with them The materials of many of his

short stories were derived from what he saw amongst the people, as Ernest Rhys puts it, "he came into touch with the real life of the people, and wrote down, not from the life, tales and parables dealing with their everyday affairs "

### VIII

During the years 1900 1901, Rabindranath entered upon another phase of his career. He wrote *Naivedya*, a collection of songs and poems in which he held aloft the ideals of ancient India and drew a lurid picture of the evils of Western nationalism which he cried down as the apotheosis of greed. One of the most remarkable poems in this book he later on translated as *The Sunset of the Century* and published it in *Nationalism* (1917). Against two evils the poet carried on a ceaseless crusade—the organization of caste in India which humiliates man and the organization of nationality in the West which brutalizes him.

In 1901 the poet made a great experiment, not in the domain of poetry but in that of education. Rabindranath's own experience of schools was unhappy, and when he had to face the problem of his son's education, the inadequacy of the system current in ordinary schools made him think out a novel method of giving instruction to children. His father had purchased in 1863 a large plot of land at Bolpur in the district of Birbhum and to this place which he named Santiniketan the *Maharshi* would occasionally retire for quiet meditation. The poet visited the place in his boyhood and must have been attracted by the surroundings. Here in 1901 Rabindranath, with his father's permission, established the *Bolpur Brahmacharyashram* which later on developed into the *Visva Bharati*. It is not necessary for our purpose to dwell on the academic aspect of this educational experiment which has aroused the curiosity of people from all parts of the world. For us it will be enough to

regard it as an expression of the poet's developing personality

There is little that is common between Rabindranath and Bernard Shaw, two of the leading writers of the world during the last hundred years. But both of them were do-nothings at school and both were merciless in their comments on their experience there. Bernard Shaw looked upon the school as a prison and Rabindranath compared the time he had passed at school to penal servitude in the Andamans. In the Preface to *Misalliance*, Bernard Shaw says, " . . . fine art is the only teacher except torture. I have already pointed out that nobody, except under threat of torture, can read a school book. The reason is that a school book is not a work of art." The ordinary school employs methods of torture—moral and intellectual and not unoften physical, but Rabindranath wanted to do away with torture in education and to teach children through the joy and the freedom which are part of the definition of art. He directed that the classes in his school be held in the open air so that educational discipline might not be sliced off from the beauty of nature, and he made singing, drawing and acting a part of the school curriculum. He wrote new text books which were not cram books but works of art, and many of the teachers employed by him were artists or people deeply imbued with the spirit of art.

In establishing this novel school at Santiniketan, Rabindranath was guided not only by his own instincts and experience but also by the tradition of the forest universities of ancient India. In India civilization had its home not in cities as in Europe but in villages, and more than in villages, in the forests (*Tapovanas*) where the sages had their hermitages or *Ashramas*. Rabindranath was a believer not only in freedom and joy but also in the harmony and unity of all existence. That is why he founded his school in the midst of impressive natural surroundings where the students would "always have the harmony of wholeness and unbroken

continuity with things", and where they would learn more from the atmosphere than from any information they might gather from books. In the ancient *Ashramas* and even in the *Chatuspathis* which were a live institution until recently, the students resided in the home of their teacher and shared with him not only board and lodging but a common spiritual culture. This was the ideal which took possession of Rabindranath's mind, and he made arrangements so that the teachers and the students of his school might live near one another and children might "come to their lesson of truths through natural processes—directly through persons and things."

It is necessary to note that it was at this time (1902) that his wife, who was his partner in his visions and his worries, died, leaving her disconsolate husband to look after their five children. The poet composed a series of touching lyrics in memory of his dead wife and called them *Smaran* (*Remembrance*). He wrote, too, a number of poems to soothe and entertain his youngest child and second son Samindra and named them *Sisu* (*The Child*), most of these child poems being translated into English in *The Crescent Moon*. He had another bereavement at this time, for his wife's death was soon followed by the death of his second daughter Renuka. It is necessary to add that these and subsequent sorrows—he had more than an ordinary man's share of bereavements—could never break his spirit or even impede the stream of his activities. The poet of harmony and joy seemed to have made peace with death which he accepted as part of the rhythm of life.

## IX

In 1905 *Maharshi* Debendranath Tagore died at the ripe age of eighty-seven. This year witnessed a tremendous upheaval in the political and social life of Bengal, for it was the year of the *Swadeshi* movement which was originally a protest against Lord Curzon's Partition of Bengal but soon

developed into a vigorous agitation, sweeping over the whole of India, for the attainment of Swaraj, 'The most graphic picture of *Swadeshi* is given by Bimala in *The Home and the World*. Says she,

"If one had to fill in, little by little, the gap between day and night, it would take an eternity to do it. But the sun rises and the darkness is dispelled,—a moment is sufficient to overcome the infinite distance.

"One day there came the new era of *Swadeshi* in Bengal; but as to how it happened, we had no distinct vision. There was no gradual slope, connecting the past with the present. For that reason, I imagine, the new epoch came in like a flood, breaking down the dykes and sweeping all our prudence and fear before it. We had no time even to think about, or understand what had happened, or what was about to happen."

The *Swadeshi* movement was partly a political agitation against the British Government which was opposed to national aspirations and which had divided Bengal in order to break her strength; it was partly an economic movement that wanted to encourage indigenous industries and, as a corollary to that, to boycott British and foreign goods. Up till now Rabindranath had taken only a moderate share in politics; he had addressed meetings and written essays, protesting against oppression and insult and upholding the self-respect of Indians. But he had not so far been an active participant, because the political movements of our country had seemed to him "devoid of all strength of national consciousness," for he found in the leaders "complete ignorance of the country," besides "supreme indifference to real service of the motherland."

Now, however, there was no lack of national consciousness, and Rabindranath was in the van of the *Swadeshi* struggle. He lectured in meetings, organized processions and composed a large number of memorable songs which were sung all over Bengal. He took a leading part in initiating the *Rakhibandhan* ceremony in which, on the

anniversary of the day of the Partition, Bengalis would bind a thread around the wrists of one another and take a vow of unity. But before long it was clear that there was wide divergence between Rabindranath and the politicians. Almost alone among the agitators, he had a direct and intimate knowledge of the country, none else had any experience of managing indigenous industries, none else had made an experiment in national education. When others dreamt vaguely of *Swaraj*, the mystic poet raised his solitary voice recommending practical work in the village, when they spoke of destruction, he was busy drawing schemes of construction, when they made hasty bonfires of foreign goods, he emphasized the need for slowly developing Indian arts and crafts, when they were delivering burning speeches in Calcutta, he coldly urged them to go to the villages, when they were loud in their condemnation of the British, he drew pointed attention to the beams in their own eyes, to the evils of caste system, of poverty, ignorance and squalor. It is not surprising that before long there was a cooling of relations between him and the other leaders of the movement, and he soon retired to Santiniketan and immersed himself in literary and educational pursuits. The *Swadeshi* agitation learnt one simple but great truth from him, that *Swaraj* is not a boon to be begged from others, it is a right to be earned. He asked the people of the country to leave the Government alone—the first anticipation of Non Co-operation—and to concentrate on what is now called nation building work.

It is interesting that after returning in disillusionment from *Swadeshi* agitation, he wrote some of his most mystical works—*Raja* (*The King of the Dark Chamber*) and the Bengali *Gitanjali* in 1909 and 1910 and *Dak Ghar* (*The Post Office*) in 1911. Referring to the works of this period, particularly to the *Gitanjali* songs, C. F. Andrews says, "They mark the great transition in his life, when the poet's national longings became merged in the universal. He has attempted—to use his own words—to express the fullness

of human life, in its beauty, as perfection." He had a bereavement in the death of his youngest child Samindra in 1907; in 1911 the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* celebrated with enthusiasm the fiftieth anniversary of his birthday. Rabindranath never lacked unfavourable critics and detractors at home or abroad, but the reception given by the *Sahitya Parishad* was an indication of the deep esteem in which the poet was being held by his countrymen. Even Dwijendralal Ray, one of the carping critics, suggested that a knighthood be conferred on him.

Rabindranath decided on going to Europe to acquaint people with the ideals of his school at Santiniketan and also to learn co-operative farming in Denmark. In the meantime he received requests from friends in England to come over and meet men like Rothenstein, who were interested in his literary work. In March 1912, he made all arrangements for his journey but suddenly fell ill and went to Shelidah where, during the period of convalescence, he made English translations of some of his Bengali poems. In May of the same year he left for England, and it was during this sojourn that the Bengali poet came to be acclaimed as a seer with a universal message.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FULFILMENT

#### I

The story of how Rabindranath came to publish the English translations to which reference has already been made and how he became celebrated all over Europe is told by Rothenstein in a pleasant narrative in *Men and Memories, Vol II*. Here it will be sufficient if only a brief resume is given of the incidents which led to the award of the Nobel Prize in 1913. Rothenstein had been struck by the English translation of *Cabuliwallah* and by some renderings of Rabindranath's poems made by Ajitkumar Chakravarti, a teacher at Santiniketan and the poet's first great interpreter. On reaching England Rabindranath showed Rothenstein his own translations. Rothenstein passed them on to W. B. Yeats and many others and they were all full of admiration for their freshness and charm. A. C. Bradley summed up the attitude of these enthusiasts when he said to Rothenstein: "It looks as though we have a great poet among us again." On the publication of these poems he became famous all over the world. There has been no end of admirers and devotees of Rabindranath and the number of detractors has been large too, but one feels that the response which has subsequently come to his poetry and also the reaction which has followed this response have been complicated by extra-literary considerations, by religious preconceptions, by political and racial bias. Here in 1912 and 1913 there was genuine literary appreciation coming from the best minds of the day—from Rothenstein, England's greatest painter, Yeats, England's greatest poet and Bradley, England's greatest critic, from the *Times Literary Supplement*, England's greatest journal and from



a number of other enthusiasts who were all distinguished in some branch of art and literature. At Rothenstein's house, the poet met C. F. Andrews who soon joined the staff of Santiniketan and became a life-long friend. It was about this time also that he purchased an old building with extensive grounds at Surul near Santiniketan, which would later on be transformed into Sriniketan or the Rural Reconstruction centre of *Visva-Bharati*.

The translations, of which about half the number were of poems in *Gitanjali*, the other half being taken from *Naivedya* and other books, were printed by the India Society in November 1912 and named *Gitanjali* or *Song-Offerings*. Macmillan soon published a popular edition, and six of these poems were printed in America in the December issue of *Poetry*, the journal of Ezra Pound who was one of the enthusiasts at Rothenstein's house. The publication of *Gitanjali* took the English reading public by storm; they were enchanted as much by the nobility of its thought as by the beauty of its language. In 1913, the poet left for America where he delivered some addresses and was glad to make the acquaintance of Rudolf Eucken, the distinguished German philosopher who had been charmed by reading *Gitanjali*. The lectures delivered by Rabindranath during this American visit were published as *Sadhana* by Macmillan, who had, after *Gitanjali*, brought out *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon* and also *Chitra* which, like *Gitanjali*, had been first published by the India Society. Rabindranath came back to England in June 1913, returning to India in October. In November of the same year it was announced that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize by the Swedish Academy. The poet was at Santiniketan and must have been very much pleased, but he realized, too, that this publicity would be a perpetual source of disturbance to him. "I shall never get any peace again," said he to himself. A crowd of admirers came in a special train from Calcutta to Santiniketan to give him an ovation. To these admirers he said, not without bitterness, that many

of them had not admired him before, that some of them had not read his works and that they had come to praise him only because the West had given him recognition, he said that he could bring near his lips the cup of honour offered by them, but he could not drink out of it. Why did he make this cruel comment? Was it because he had been piqued at the unfortunate reviews and parodies made of his poems in the past? Or was he angry at the lack of self respect shown by his countrymen who, even in admiring their own poet, were aping Westerners?

## II

After the first wave of enthusiasm which followed the Nobel award had subsided, the poet found himself in a mood that was strangely significant. During his sojourn in England and America he had seen at first hand many samples of Western civilization, and now he felt although only as a dreamer and a poet, that some evil was impending, that modern civilization was heading for a crash. In this state of mental agony he wrote two of his most beautiful poems—*The Destroyer* (Crossing—22) and *The Trumpet* (Fruit Gathering—35). In the former he wrote

“Is it the Destroyer who comes?

For the boisterous sea of tears heaves in the  
flood tide of pain

The crimson clouds run wild in the wind lashed  
by lightning, and the thundering laughter of the  
Mad is over the sky

Life sits in the chariot crowned by Death ”

But although he was perturbed by the gathering clouds spread by the Destroyer, his optimism was unbedimmed for he saw behind the darkness of the rainy night the torch light of the Bridegroom. In *The Trumpet*, the note of

hope and the message of courage are more strident still. He saw God's trumpet lying in the dust and exclaimed

'From thee I have asked peace only to find shame  
Now I stand before thee—help me to put on  
my armour!  
Let hard blows of trouble strike fire into my life  
Let my heart beat in pain, the drum of thy victory'

This was in May 1914 and the Serajevo murders were yet to come. C. F. Andrews was right to say that the coming conflagration seemed to have sent a wireless message to him in advance. It is in poems like these that we realize best the nearness of poetry to prophecy.

It was about this time that the students and the staff of the Phoenix school started by M. K. Gandhi in the Transvaal came to stay for some weeks at Santiniketan and Gandhi and the poet met for the first time in March 1915. It was on this occasion that Rabindranath gave to Gandhi the appropriate title of *Mahatma* or the Great souled. In 1915 the poet was knighted.

In 1916 Rabindranath left for Japan accompanied by Andrews and others and was given splendid ovation both in Japan and in the countries he visited on the way. Japan was drunk with the doctrine of nationalism which she had learnt from the West and Western nationalism had never a sterner foe than in Rabindranath. At the Imperial University of Tokyo and at Keio Gijuku University he delivered lectures condemning the cult of nationalism which was atrophying the spirit of humanity, and it is no wonder that these lectures had their immediate effect in antagonizing dominant sections in Japan. A significant gesture was made by somebody somewhere and although no positive discourtesy was shown to him all the enthusiasm displayed on his arrival seemed to have evaporated. He received no more invitations to deliver lectures, and Japanese newspapers even denounced him as the poet of a

defeated nation. The poet received this reversal calmly, and his faith in his ideals never wavered. This mood is reflected in the beautiful poem he wrote now—*The Song of the Defeated*—in which he said

“My Master has bid me while I stand at the roadside,  
to sing the song of Defeat, for that is the bride whom  
he woos in secret

\* \* \* \*

She is forsaken of the day, and God's night is waiting  
for her with its lamps lighted and flowers wet with dew”  
(*Fruit Gathering*—85)

Rabindranath now left for America where he stayed for a few months, delivering lectures in many places, condemning Western nationalism and British rule in India and giving an exposition of his philosophy of personality. These lectures were published by Macmillan and named *Nationalism and Personality*. In America these lectures were listened to with attention by thousands of men and women, but they were also severely criticized by people who could not subscribe to his doctrines. One of these critics was Ram Chandra of the *Hindustan Gadr* (Revolutionary) party who attacked the poet for retaining his British knighthood while condemning British rule in India, and it was even rumoured—although falsely—that the young Indian revolutionaries wanted to kill him. The poet refused to believe in this rumour and declined the police protection offered by American authorities. He returned to India in March 1917, visiting Japan on the way back.

In India he got mixed up again in contemporary politics which he had left after the first hectic period of the *Swadeshi* agitation. The Extremists, who had left the Congress after the fiasco at Surat in 1907, returned to the fold in 1916, and in 1917 they proposed Mrs Annie Besant for the Presidentship, but the Moderates backed the Raja of Mahmudabad. The Moderate nominee for the Chairman

ship of the Reception Committee was Baikunthanath Sen, but the Extremists headed by Matlal Ghose and C. R. Das offered Rabindranath the Chairmanship in place of Baikunthanath Sen. The poet, who was an ardent supporter of Mrs Annie Besant, accepted the offer on condition that he must not be pitted as a rival to Baikunthanath Sen. A compromise was later on effected between the rival parties; Mrs Besant became the President and Baikunthanath Sen was retained as Chairman. Although the poet had himself suggested that he could be considered for the Chairmanship if only the seat fell vacant, he seemed to look very much like the twelfth man in a cricket match who dons his flannels and is dropped. This was an unfortunate episode in his career, for as one looks back at these incidents from a distance of about thirty years, one feels that although there was nothing wrong in what the poet did, he showed an imperfect understanding of the political situation and contributed little to the solution of the problem that had arisen.

In May 1918, the fantastic suggestion was communicated to him that during his stay in America he had been connected with Indian revolutionaries there—in America it was said that Indian revolutionaries wanted to kill him—and that his anti-British lectures had been financed by Germany! He wrote an indignant letter to President Wilson and cancelled a proposed tour to America. In the same month his eldest child and daughter died.

The War was over in November 1918; in 1919 Mahatma Gandhi embarked on his Satyagraha movement against the passing of the Rowlatt Bill, and the poet wrote him a letter, warning him about the consequences to which such an agitation might lead. Just at this moment came the Punjab disturbances and the measures taken against the people of Amritsar by General Dyer. On account of the censorship news was slow to reach outsiders, but by the end of May, Rabindranath had formed an idea of the actions taken under Martial Law. In indignant protest against the

humiliation and suffering heaped on his countrymen he addressed a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, renouncing his knighthood. The renunciation was worthy of the man and the language of the letter worthy of the poet.

In July 1919 he opened at Santiniketan the *Vidyabhawan* which was a home for advanced studies in ancient Indian literatures and in Tibetan and Chinese. The significance of this incident will be discussed in a later section. In 1920 Rabindranath left for Europe.

### III

Rabindranath arrived in England in June 1920 and was greeted by old friends and new. Amongst those he met now were Bernard Shaw, Gilbert Murray and Roerich, the Russian painter. Although there was no open hostility and at one of the meetings held in the poet's honour the famous actress Sybil Thorndike recited a poem, it was clear that the old enthusiasm for him had cooled. Robert Bridges was to have presided over a students' reception held in honour of Rabindranath, but at the last moment the Poet Laureate excused himself. What was this cooling due to? Thompson allots a share of the blame to Rabindranath and his publishers who flung at English readers truncated translations of the Bengali poems without any illuminating notes and comments. Indian admirers think that the "studied coolness" was due to the poet's renouncing his knighthood, which British respectability could not forgive.

He left England and came to France where amongst others, he met Henri Bergson, Sylvain Levi and Comtesse de Noailles, the French poetess who bore a striking testimony to the appeal of Rabindranath's poetry, for she said that in 1914 when war was declared between France and England, she was with Clemenceau and the "Tiger", who was very much depressed by the news, turned to the French translation of *Gitanjali* for a message of consolation.

and hope. After a short visit to Holland and Belgium where he was warmly received, Rabindranath went to America, because he felt that America needed the message of the East. In America, the reception was mixed; there were enthusiasts, but there was also a strong counter-propaganda which accused him of being anti-British and pro-German and also suggested that he was airing sectarian political views under the guise of internationalism. After a stay of about five months, he left for Europe again. The most significant incident of this American tour was his meeting with L. K. Elmhirst and Mrs Straight who was later on married to Elmhirst. It was Elmhirst's enthusiasm and specialized knowledge and his wife's munificence which enabled Rabindranath to start rural reconstruction work at Sriniketan in 1922.

Coming back to Europe, Rabindranath visited Germany, Sweden and many other countries. In most places scenes of frenzied hero-worship marked his arrival and departure; the admiration shown for him was beyond the dreams of poets in the past and would be the envy and despair of poets in the future. In Germany, his sixty-first birthday was celebrated with enthusiasm, and amongst the sponsors were Hauptmann, Eucken and Thomas Mann. In Berlin Lady D'Abernon, Lord Rosebery's daughter and wife of the British Ambassador, wanted to attend one of the meetings in which the poet read from his own poetry, but not only could she not get into the room but she could hardly get into the street,—so great was the crowd. At the University of Upsala his admirers conducted him in a procession of torches, and at a dinner given in his honour by the Swedish Academy, the Archbishop of Upsala made the appropriate comment: "The Nobel Prize for literature is intended for the writer who combines in himself the artist and the prophet. None has fulfilled these conditions better than Rabindranath Tagore."

Rabindranath returned to India in July 1921, and after a month of his arrival he delivered a striking address

on the meeting of Eastern and Western cultures. On the 22nd December 1921 he formally inaugurated the *Visva Bharati*. With a poet's detachment, he conceived it in the midst of the European war, and with a poet's detachment, again, he founded it in the midst of Non Co operation in India.

#### IV

What is this *Visva Bharati* to which Rabindranath dedicated the last twenty years of his life? Roughly speaking, it is an international seat of learning which was formally founded in 1921. But the idea is much older. In 1902 Rabindranath had read his famous paper on the interpretation of Indian history in which he claimed that India is neither the Hindu's nor the Muslims nor the Englishman's that the distinctive feature of Indian history consists in the way in which India has tried to achieve unity in the midst of diversity. The same idea is expressed in a poem he wrote eight years after this (*Bengali Gitanjali*—107), in which he said that on the shore of India men of all races and creeds would find their place of union. This shows that the idea of a meeting place for diverse peoples and cultures had been haunting the poet's mind for a long time. This may be regarded as the seed of *Visva Bharati*.

At Santiniketan he had, amongst many remarkable men, two foreign teachers—C. F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson who joined the institution in 1913-1914. The association of these men must have convinced him that Santiniketan might attract men of different countries and races and thus help India to fulfil her destiny. In 1913 he wrote to Andrews, "In our Asram at Santiniketan we must have the widest possible outlook for our boys and universal human interests." "It was during the early days of the war," says Andrews (*Rolland and Tagore*), "when the whole race of mankind appeared to be involved in a cataclysm of death that the poet Rabindranath conceived the idea of world



fellowship and culture at Santiniketan." Santiniketan began gradually to attract students from outside Bengal; by 1918 there was quite a number of students who belonged to Gujarat. The idea now dawned on the poet that his school should neither be sectarian nor provincial; it should belong to the whole of India and he communicated his thoughts to Andrews and his son Rathindranath. In December of this year he explained, at the annual festival at Santiniketan, his ideal of founding an institution of learning for the whole of India. He now laid the foundation stone of a building dedicated to this purpose. It was the munificence of certain rich men of Gujarat which made it possible for him to build this house, and at the anniversary held this year (22nd December 1918), men and women of different communities performed their own distinctive religious rituals. The idea of achieving unity in the midst of diversity in India was thus taking a distinctive shape. In 1919 in South India and in Calcutta, he delivered addresses on the peculiar features of the forest universities of India and enunciated his own comprehensive views on education. He now gave to his ideal school, which was yet in a preparatory stage, the name of *Visva-Bharati*. At Santiniketan work started on an extensive scale and arrangements were made for advanced studies in ancient literature and modern science. Borrowing a term from modern economics, Rabindranath spoke of the modern age as an age of co-operation in culture, and he saw that all branches of scholarship—ancient and modern—were suitably represented in the new centre of learning to be founded by him. Reference has already been made to the opening of the *Vidyabhawan* in 1919 which marked a stage in the evolution of *Visva-Bharati*; but up till now it was an Indian University; there was more of *Bharat* (India) than of *Visva* (World) in it.

During his European tour, he was impressed by the warm welcome he received from people who did not know his language but were eager to listen to his message; equally

was he impressed by the tremendous activities of modern science. With characteristic self-confidence he felt that he had something to say which the West must learn, and with characteristic modesty he felt that the message was a message of the East rather than of an individual poet of India. From Holland he wrote to Andrews, "Now I know more closely than ever that Santiniketan belongs to all the world and we shall have to be worthy of this great fact." Thus the warm reception he received in the West only confirmed him in his vision of the synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures.

When he returned to India, he found her in the throes of Non co operation. Efforts were made to recruit him as a supporter of this movement, and even at Santiniketan there were forces in favour of the new cult, but he steadily refused to join this agitation, incurring much unpopularity which he bore bravely. He praised the West for the way in which it had advanced in the march of life, it was the result not merely of brute force but of courage, perseverance and the ability to face truth objectively, and these are spiritual qualities. The West might have much to learn from the East, but it had also much to teach. He lectured on the co-operation of cultures, and when he heard that Mahatma Gandhi had asked women to stop studying English, he was *very much pained and protested, saying that he saw here an attempt to make a prison of one's own house and to build walls around it so that light might not penetrate from outside.* Secondly, although he was the enemy of the mechanization of life *he was not opposed to machines, he only wanted them to be dominated by rather than be allowed to dominate the spirit.* That is why he could not accept the cult of the spinning wheel or *charka*. Thirdly, he very much objected to the adoption of any short cut to *Swaraj*.

In 1921 *Visva-Bharati* was formally inaugurated and Sylvain Levi was the first Visiting Professor. Its motto was *Yatra Visvam Bhabatyekanidam* (Where the whole world becomes a single nest). "*Visva Bharati*", said he, "repre

sents India where she has her wealth of mind which is for all *Visva Bharati* acknowledges India's obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from their best." From now till he was incapacitated by age and illness, he toured various places of the world in search of support—moral and financial—for *Visva Bharati*. There was generous assistance from the Nizam of Hyderabad, from the Gaekwar of Baroda, from other wealthy Indians, from China and Iran, from Europe and America, but the response the poet got was hardly adequate for his needs, and that is why he had to beg from door to door, often returning with a meagre dole and some times with nothing. The spectacle of the venerable poet now appealing to an American millionairess and then to an Indian satrap and holding dance recitals for raising funds was, indeed, very pathetic, and Mahatma Gandhi felt that the poet should be relieved of financial worry. When, in course of a tour of dance recitals, the poet was at Delhi in 1936, Mahatmaji made him cancel his programmes, and at Mahatmaji's instance an anonymous donor contributed Rs. 60,000 to help *Visva Bharati* liquidate its debts. Although *Visva Bharati* is even now carrying on its work on the ideals of its founder, it has not yet got the recognition or the response that was expected. Is it a noble ideal that will fulfil itself as the years pass on? Or is it only a magnificent dream of a mystic poet which will before long come to nothing? History will answer.

## V

The evolution of *Visva Bharati* has carried us far beyond 1921 where we left the narrative in the last section but one, and it is there that the story must be resumed now. A month after the founding of *Visva Bharati*, Rabindranath inaugurated the Rural Reconstruction Department at Surul and named it Sriniketan, because *Sri* or *Laksmi* is the goddess of plenty in Hindu mythology.

Thanks to the assistance of the Elmhursts and the organizing ability of a band of selfless workers, Sriniketan has done marvellous work. It will not be relevant to our purpose to give a detailed account of its activities, the only thing that need be mentioned here is that this institution enabled the poet to realize his ideal of complete education which, he thought, should never be dissociated from the pursuits of life. "Education", he says, "should not be dragged out of its native elements, the life current of the people. Economic life covers the whole width of the fundamental basis of society, because its necessities are the most universal." With its agricultural farm, its orchards, its Health-Society for which very useful work was done by Harry Timbers, an American expert, its School of Crafts, Sriniketan is bringing the academic education given at Santiniketan near the life of the people.

In March 1924, Rabindranath went to China and Japan and in both places delivered lectures condemning modern nationalism in which he found the glorification of greed. He returned in July of the same year, but after staying in India for about two months, he left for South America, intending to attend the Centenary Celebrations of the independence of Peru. He could not participate in the celebrations, because ill health made him cancel his programme at Buenos Ayres where he stayed for some days, writing poems. Here he enjoyed the hospitality of a remarkable woman, Madame Victoria Ocampo whom the poet called Vijaya, dedicating to her the poems he wrote at this time.

In January 1925 Rabindranath left for Italy and after lecturing at Milan and visiting Venice he returned to India in February. His next Italian visit which happened a year after was the most sensational of his many foreign tours, and it throws curious light on modern methods of propaganda which does not shrink from exploiting a poet's reputation for political purposes. The poet thought that he was going to Italy at the invitation of his Italian friends and admirers, of men without any political hall mark, but very

soon there were evidences that it was a conducted tour managed by the Fascist Government. He was carried in a special train from Naples to Rome and was given an ovation in all the cities he visited; he was received by the King of Italy, and Mussolini, who was then making history and has since passed out of it, had two interviews with him. Everywhere there were signs of a warm welcome, and the poet, who was naturally pleased, made statements, praising Mussolini's strength of personality and his capacity for work; the poet almost hoped that the mechanical civilization he condemned might be illuminated with personality. This is what Mussolini's press was waiting for; exaggerated reports were manufactured of what was largely a courteous response to warm hospitality, and the poet of internationalism was soon advertised all over the world as a champion of the Fascist regime which had murdered Mationetti, exiled Croce and done all it could to throttle independence of personality.

After a stay of six months in which he was entertained in regal splendour and high honours were showered on him, Rabindranath left Italy and came to Switzerland where he met Romain Rolland and other friends who disillusioned him about his Italian tour and showed how he, too, had been used as a gear in the Fascist machine. Here are Romain Rolland's own words: "Often I have accused myself for having disturbed your rest when I took away from you the confidence you had in your Italian hosts. However, I had no other interest in my mind but your glory, which I value more than your rest. I did not want devils misusing your sacred name in the annals of history."

Rabindranath now took in the situation clearly and wrote to *The Manchester Guardian*, reaffirming his admiration for Mussolini's ability but repudiating Fascism which had committed so many atrocities. Professor Formichi, who had acted as his guide, replied to some of the allegations made by the poet about the manner in which his name was used by the Fascist press, and the poet wrote again, elucidating his

views. This drew the curtain over an unpleasant episode in Rabindranath's life.

## VI

After leaving Switzerland Rabindranath visited many places in Europe—England, Norway, Germany, the Balkans, Greece and Egypt. In Italy he had met Croce who expressed great admiration for the classical form of Rabindranath's poetry. In the other countries of Europe he made the acquaintance of many remarkable personalities—Nansen, Bjornson, Bojer, Sven Hedin and Brandes. In Greece he was admitted to the Order of the Redeemer. It will appear from *The Golden Book of Tagore* that most of the distinguished men of letters he met in Europe were impressed by his personality and work. Germany was then entering upon its Fascist phase, and the reception he got on this occasion was less warm than on his previous visit. He had an hour's talk with President Hindenburg—a strange meeting between the champion of national kultur and the exponent of international culture! He returned to Santiniketan in April 1927, but left again on a foreign tour in July, visiting on this occasion, Malaya, Java, Bali and Siam. This visit kept him away from India for about four months, he had to undertake another journey in 1929 when he was invited to Canada to participate in the Triennial Conference of the National Council of Education. He would have visited American Universities also in course of this tour but was upset by an incident at Los Angeles where at the Emigration Office he found that coloured peoples were subjected to humiliating treatment. He cancelled his American programme and came back to India, visiting Japan and French Indo-China on the way back. These foreign visits in course of which he received high honours and delivered speeches to packed audiences bear witness to the largeness of his contacts, the width of his vision and the universality of his message.

Rabindranath's next foreign tour found him in a new role. Hitherto he had been a musician and a literary artist; now he emerged as a painter. He opened an exhibition of his pictures in Paris in May 1932, and subsequently there were exhibitions at Copenhagen, Moscow and other places, too. Conflicting opinions are expressed about the value and significance of his work in this domain of art. Some are charmed by the dreaminess of his pictures and the atmosphere of mystery they create as also by the technical virtuosity they display. But others are repelled by their quaintness and by their apparent lack of meaning; he himself, it must be remembered, was loth to give them any specific names. The poet's own apology is worth pondering:

"The only training which I had from my young days was the training in rhythm, the rhythm in thought, the rhythm in sound. I had come to know that rhythm gives reality to that which is desultory, which is insignificant in itself. . . ."

My pictures are my versification in lines. If by chance they are entitled to claim recognition, it must be primarily for some rhythmic significance of form which is ultimate, and not for any interpretation of an idea, or representation of a fact." (Quoted from *Tagore Memorial Supplement—The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*).

From France Rabindranath proceeded to England and delivered at Oxford his Hibbert lectures which have been published as *The Religion of Man*. "No series of Hibbert lectures," wrote *The Manchester Guardian*, "has aroused more public interest than the present one." These lectures, which have no philosophical or theological pretensions, contain the record of a poet's simple, direct vision of truth; they are nevertheless amongst the most important contributions to the enunciation of a *Weltanschauung* for man. From England the poet went to Germany, where there was a revival of the Tagore vogue, and his secretary reported that he travelled "like royalty"; whenever the name Tagore was uttered, all who heard it—hotel keepers, tram conduc-

tors, university students and teachers, merchants, political leaders, dukes and princes—would respond, beaming. In Berlin, Rabindranath had an interview with Einstein, the report of which has been published in *The Religion of Man*. From Germany he went to Denmark, from Denmark to Geneva and from Geneva to Soviet Russia, arriving at Moscow in September 1930.

Rabindranath's visit to Soviet Russia was one of the significant episodes of his life. He went there at the invitation of the Soviet Government, being as much anxious to see new Russia as the people of the Soviet were to have him in their midst. It was, indeed, interesting that the great mystical poet should have first hand experience of the largest secular experiment in history. The Russians extended a warm welcome to the "profound thinker" who had gone to them to study their "strivings for the renewal of human society, and thus of human personality itself." What did the 'profound thinker' think about them?

He was full of admiration but also full of criticism. Upton Sinclair, who had not read his letters from Russia, said, "It seems to me that the evils of modern times, which he deplores—of materialism, ugliness, and greed—are not caused by the use of machinery, but by the fact that the machinery is in private hands and used for private profit, and for the exploitation of all members of the community except those who happen to own the machinery. I expect a wholly different kind of civilization when machinery is socially owned and used for the social welfare. I believe that it will then be no longer the enemy of the soul of man, and will no longer have to be challenged by poets and dramatists. I plead with a great poet and moralist of India to lend his precious gifts to the service of the movement to socialize and thus to humanize industry' (*The Golden Book of Tagore*). Rabindranath who was a relentless critic of Western nationalism in which he saw the glorification of the professional man at the expense of the personal, marvelled at the way in which, in a socialist state,



men were warring with success on ignorance and poverty and were thus enhancing the wealth and welfare of society. But he found that much of the good work was done through the application of force and that the Communist state was as intolerant of criticism as its Fascist enemy. This might, however, be a passing evil, but the poet pointed unmistakably to a deeper source of mischief in the Communist experiment. It placed, as it was bound to place, a greater emphasis on the needs of the community than on the claims of the individual. Rabindranath saw here more of the "renewal of human society" than of the renewal of "human personality itself." Possibly the poet, who had greater faith in individuals than in institutions, felt that the leaders of the Russian Revolution had started their great experiment at the wrong end. They had begun with the reorganization of society and then looked to the rejuvenation of the human spirit. Should they not have reversed the process?

### VIII

In February 1931 Rabindranath returned to India. Elaborate arrangements were made this year to celebrate his seventieth birthday. These celebrations, which are popularly known in India as *Rabindra Jayanti*, were held in December 1931 and January 1932 and comprised a large and varied programme. The most enduring contributions of this festival which evoked great enthusiasm are two books of essays published by the organizers—*Jayanti-Utsarga* (Rengal) and *The Golden Book of Tagore*. The sponsors of *The Golden Book of Tagore* were Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Kostas Palamas and Mahatma Gandhi. Amongst the contributors were Jawaharlal Nehru, Bertrand Russell, James Barrie, Maurice Maeterlinck, Selma Lagerlof, Knut Hamsun, Benèdetto Croce and Johan Bojer. Indeed, it seemed that all the most distinguished men of letters of the world had joined the hymn of praise. Shaw was the only remarkable exception. Possibly Shaw kept

aloof, because he does not celebrate anybody's birthday—neither Shakespeare's nor his own. The celebrations were stopped on the 5th January 1932 when news arrived of Gandhiji's arrest. The poet was greatly perturbed over this repressive measure and wrote a moving poem to express his indignation. (*The Fugitive, And Other Poems—This Evil Day.*)

A few months after this Rabindranath visited Iran and Iraq where signal honours were showered on him. On return to India he joined the University of Calcutta as Ramtanu Lahiri Professor of Bengali. He also delivered the Kamala Lectures on the religion of man at the University of Calcutta. In 1918 the University had conferred on him an honorary Doctorate of Literature and in 1923 he had delivered a course of Readership lectures on poetics. On his accepting an appointment as Professor of Bengali, the University held an academic reception in his honour in August 1932.

It was at this time that Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award was announced, and there was a storm of protest against it. The Muslims thought that they had not got what they desired or deserved; the Hindus thought that it was designed to wreck them, and nationalist India generally saw in it an attempt to extend and perpetuate the policy of Divide and Rule. There were people who held that the poet should have kept aloof from these squabbles, but he could not. His intervention was characteristic; he protested against the award now and afterwards, but reminded his countrymen that they should trust to their own efforts rather than wait in indolent expectation of favour and fair play from the Government and that they should aim at constructive work and unite to eradicate communal and class differences. This advice was reminiscent of what he had said in the days of the *Swadeshi* agitation. Mahatmaji, who was in prison at this time, was deeply aggrieved over what he considered the most insidious provision in the Award—the division of Hindus into higher

castes and Scheduled castes, and decided on a fast unto death unless that portion of the Award was modified. Rabindranath rushed to Poona where the Mahatma was fasting in jail, cabled to Ramsay MacDonald, and on the signing of the Poona Pact, Mahatmaji broke his fast in the presence of the poet.

In December 1932, Rabindranath presided over the inaugural meeting of the Centenary Celebration of the death of Raja Rammohan Ray for whom he had unbounded respect. He wrote for this centenary his poem *Freedom (The Fugitive, And Other Poems)*, which, read with *Gitanjali* no. 35 (Where the mind is without fear), gives us an idea of the poet's comprehensive vision of freedom for India. It was now that the Shah of Persia sent Professor Pourc Daud to *Visva Bharati*, and Bernard Shaw came to Bombay. The poet sent a letter of invitation to Shaw, but the latter excused himself on grounds of health, adding, "My only regret is that I shall not be able to visit you."

During the last few years of his life Rabindranath visited many places in India and Ceylon, but growing infirmity prevented him from undertaking any foreign tour. The Universities of Dacca, Benares and Hyderabad conferred on him honorary Doctorates, and he addressed the Convocation of the University of Calcutta in 1937, being the first non official to deliver an address at this function. The stream of his literary productions—poems, dramas and stories—continued unabated, but it was clear that his physical vitality, if not his mental power, was in decline. The most picturesque function associated with his latest years was a special Convocation held by the University of Oxford at Santiniketan on the 7th August 1940 to confer on him an honorary Doctorate of Literature. In 1912 Fox Strangways had suggested that Oxford or Cambridge should give Rabindranath an honorary degree. Lord Curzon, then Chancellor of Oxford, was consulted, but he turned down the suggestion, saying airily that there were many men in India more distinguished than Tagore. Who these worthier

Indians were the noble Lord did not pause to specify. But the whirligig of time brought in its revenges, and twenty eight years after the turning down of Fox Strangways proposal, the University of Oxford made ample amends, for this was possibly the first time that the University of Oxford—or any other University—had travelled to confer a degree on a graduate.

The story of the poet's last days is briefly told. He was taken seriously ill in September 1940, but rallied after a critical period and wrote poems, addresses and even entered on a controversy. But he had a relapse in June 1941, and although all efforts were made to save his life the end came on the 7th August, 1941. He was mourned all over the world, for he had not only written great poetry but also lived a great life. As we review his career, the final impression we derive is of a man of supreme courage. In India which is ridden by caste distinctions and communal differences, he spoke unceasingly of our own weakness, and although none was more alive to the evils of foreign rule he said a good word for the British when he felt that the foreigner must have his due and he was never tired of saying that *Swaraj* would not be won until we had set our own house in order, otherwise it would not be worth having, even if it came. To proud Westerners who were intoxicated with power, success and greed he read lessons on renunciation and sacrifice, and like a prophet he foresaw the bankruptcy of modern European civilization. He had plenty of opposition to face and no one had more of the sweet syrup of adulation, but his vision was never obscured, his courage never faltered. Mahatma Gandhi called him The Great Sentinel. The title was appropriate. It is as a Sentinel that he watched, in an age of fading spirituality, the great ideals of love, joy, freedom and harmony.

## CHAPTER III

### IDEAS AND IMAGES

#### I

4 If the ideas Rabindranath stood for and preached are to be summed up in one word, that word is unity, for he is essentially the poet and prophet of rhythm, harmony and completeness. What is the most distinguishing feature of life? Says Sir James Jeans, a scientist, 'While living matter consists of quite ordinary atoms it consists in the main of atoms which have a special capacity for coagulating into extraordinary large bunches or 'molecules'. It is this characteristic of life into which the poet has read his own meaning he has been impressed by the fact that the creation of life does not mean an aggregation of cells but a marvellous quality of complex interrelationship amongst them. According to him, it is this universal relatedness which is the truth of this world. In the physical world man is realizing this unity by means of the discovery of universal laws which govern multitudes of facts. The more universal the law is, the deeper is its significance.

There is one aspect of this unity to which Rabindranath draws pointed attention and which must be emphasized as giving the key to his philosophy of life. Although the laws which govern physical facts may be inherent in matter, the consciousness of the existence of these laws is spiritual, it is the mind which observes facts and finds the thread of unity binding them together. This shows that although facts may be non human truth can have only a human significance. In an interview with Einstein he said 'if there be some truth which has no sensuous or rational relation to the human mind it will ever remain as nothing so long as we

remain human beings" The world of matter by itself is empty of significance, it becomes true and beautiful only when it is woven into the fibres of man's mind

The necessity for fulfilment through union with something lying beyond is probably more imperative for man than for the world of matter Even the most selfish man who cares for nothing but the gratification of his own desires has to cancel his immediate pleasures in order to gain his *ends the better in future* This shows that if he has to be thoroughly selfish, he must extend his consciousness in time, he has to connect the present with the past and the future Along with extension in time, there is the equally urgent need for expansion in space "It is the very characteristic of life that it is not complete within itself, it must come out Its truth is in the commerce of the inside and the outside" (*Sadhana*) It is not merely true that one man has commerce with another, but the body requires light and air, and we have all our daily contact with the material universe There are men who think that the universe is callous and even hostile to man who is radically separate from it Such a view of life, which seems to have the support of science, is misguided, because the scientist himself has to understand the universe, and understanding is not only human but also personal When I know something, it becomes a part of my own consciousness, of my own personality The principal feature of human personality is that it is transcendental, that it fulfils itself by reaching forward to what lies beyond itself, to what should be and what might be The finite looks forward to the infinite, *the individual to the universal* It is *man's consciousness* that he is potentially greater than what he is at present, that he is related to the universal life, which is the foundation of morality The fervour of human desire acquires loftiness only when, as in the third canto of Kalidasa's *Kumarsambhavam*, "the boisterous outbreak of passion is shown against a background of universal life"

## II

The source of this complex interrelatedness in human life is to be found in the region of the surplus. "The most important distinction between the animal and man is this that the animal is very nearly bound within the limits of its necessities, the greater part of its activities being necessary for its self-preservation and the preservation of-race . . . there is a vast excess of wealth in man's life, which gives him the freedom to be useless and irresponsible to a great measure." (*Personality*) Rabindranath points out a simple distinction between man and the lower animals. The latter have four feet which are both attached to the ground; all the feet are required for the immediate, physical necessities of maintaining equilibrium and making locomotion possible. Man performs these things with his feet and only partly with his hands which do some useful things but are free to do many useless things also. Indeed, of all animals man alone has surplus and the leisure to enjoy it. This is true not only of mere physical existence but also of his intellectual contacts with the world. Like other animals, man must know because he must live, but he has, too, a surplus of knowledge which has no relation to practical needs. The law of gravitation helps engineering, but it is something more than an aid to the securing of amenities. It is prized by man primarily as an evidence of the triumph of his intellect which binds detached physical facts into a unity.

The surplus is in excess of man's needs; that is its definition. It is, therefore, free from the bondage of practical life, and here Rabindranath finds the true meaning of freedom. Freedom means not only political and economic freedom but liberation of the soul from the bondage of practical utility; indeed, political or economic freedom is valuable only in so far as it enables the soul to achieve this deliverance. It is in this liberated self that man's personality is found. His practical neces-

sities tie him to the finite world of facts and desires, but the world of the surplus is not bound by any limitation. It brings man face to face with the infinite. By realizing the wealth of surplus in himself, an individual feels that he is greater than his own limited world, he comes to know that he is only a vehicle through whom the Supreme Man or Man the Great speaks and acts. The infinite revealing itself in and through the finite is the definition of human personality. The individual man must, therefore, overcome his greed and selfishness and express himself in disinterested work, in science and philosophy, in literature and art, in service and worship. This is his religion. (*The Religion of Man*)

Such a concept of freedom must be distinguished from independence. Independence which means separation from all things is empty of content, the independence of selfishness must lead to something positive, and the positive content of freedom is found in the realization of the Supreme Person revealing Himself in the world and yet transcending it. God is, therefore, both immanent and transcendent, He is in man and nature and yet above them. Man can find God by approaching Him through personality, by realizing his relationship with the universe around him. Men must "cultivate mutual understanding and co-operation", they must know that they are not cut off from the world of things, in short, the individual mind must approach the Universal Mind as the stream runs to the sea. Thus interpreted, freedom means harmony of relationship, men and material things must not only be related to one another but must be harmoniously related, because all are parts of the revelation of the Supreme Person or the Universal Mind. It is selfishness alone that sets barriers between man and man and presents the physical world as hostile to the human. It is easy to understand, in this context, Rabindranath's unceasing opposition to the organization of caste in India and of the nation in the West, for both these organizations impede, in their working, the



freedom of human personality. As is well-known, Rabindranath did not become a lawyer, although he was intended to be so. He became, as the *Calcutta Weekly Notes* appropriately said, "the law's philosopher". "The history of the growth of freedom" says he, "is the history of the perfection of human relationship."

### III

One remarkable effect of man's freedom is that he is a creator. He does not eat the food nature provides; he dresses, cooks and creates his food out of materials ready to his hand. In thus making his food, he not merely satisfies his animal needs but has a sense of power and a sense of delight, which are spiritual. It is the expression of the surplus in his vitality. The same thing is true of man's clothing. Nature has sent him naked into the world, but he clothes his body with dress of his own making. In designing his clothes, he is anxious to cover his limbs no doubt; but equally is he anxious to make his clothes suit his tastes, and these tastes would be superfluous, if the covering of his body were the only consideration. He can think of his likes and dislikes only because he has leisure and freedom.

It is man's freedom that makes him a creative artist. The fundamental truth of human life is that man can see visions and dream dreams as he likes. This power which is named imagination is not subject to the necessities of practical life; it does not satisfy any need; it is its own reward. This spontaneous activity which is effortless and satisfies our hearts without any allurements but its own ultimate value is creative; it should be distinguished from constructive works which, being utilitarian, are governed by the mechanism of means and ends.

The creative freedom which man enjoys is a part of his heritage from God. God has made the world and is still making it not as a clockmaker making a clock but as an

artist creating a work of art, it is His *lila*, as a Vaishnava poet or philosopher would say. *Lila* is an untranslatable word, it means play or delight, but that is only part of its connotation. The first characteristic of God's or the artist's *lila* is that it is not guided by any ulterior purpose or motive, it exists in and for itself, it proceeds from *Hladini Sakti* or God's and the artist's joy and bliss. Although it is a joyous activity which has no reference to any ulterior aim, it does not follow that it is a mere pastime unconnected with the artist's deeper self. Creation is manifestation, the principal feature of a work of art is that it expresses the hidden personality of the artist. God is conceived as the supreme Will and it is in the universe that He expresses Himself. *Lila* is not only unmotivated but also unimpeded and elusive, being a ceaseless process in which the divine artist both conceals and expresses himself. God did not stop the process of creation after a fixed period of time. He did not have to face any struggle. The Infinite is constantly revealing itself in the finite, in the starry heavens, in the flowers, and, most of all, in the soul of man, for man, too, is a creator. "The world as an art is the play of the Supreme Person revelling in image making. Try to find out the ingredients of the image—they elude you, they never reveal to you the eternal secret of appearance. It never tries to conceal its evasiveness, it mocks even its own definition and plays the game of hide and seek through its constant flight in changes."

It may be thought that if creation is purposeless, unimpeded and elusive, it will lead to new and ever new extravagance, and artistic work will mean only the cultivation of eccentricity. But this is not true for the final truth of life is interrelatedness, the unity which is the product of harmony. A work of art is the revelation of the personality of the artist, and this personality exercises a controlling, centralizing influence on the works created. "It is the joy of unity within ourselves," which "seeking expression becomes creative", and this sense of inner unity can be fully realized

if only the artist feels the presence of the Supreme Person who comprehends both the material world and the human. "The fact that the world stirs our imagination in sympathy tells us that this creative imagination is a common truth both in us and in the heart of existence." Looked at from this point of view, beauty is not a mere human creation, as one might be led to think from Rabindranath's interview with Einstein. It is the expression of the sense of unity between man and nature, between the finite and the infinite; it is the self-offering of the One to the other One. (*Creative Unity*).

#### IV

Rabindranath's insistence on the union of the One and the other One shows that he is a believer in rhythm and harmony; he rejects the theory of absolute identity. In arriving at this peculiar conception of unity, he was helped by his father who was a monotheist without being a monist and by the doctrines of Vaishnavism, which put forward the theory of a mysterious identity in difference. Rabindranath does posit an ineffaceable duality; only in his view, the duality is not the final truth, for it is controlled by the laws of rhythm which bring about harmony. Even modern science which is supposed to be dualistic has to accept rhythm as the law of matter. "Has not science," exclaims the poet, "shown us the fact that the ultimate difference between one element and another is only that of rhythm?" This is only a poetical representation of the researches of Mendeleef, Bohr, Sommerfield and others who showed that the properties of elements are repeated after regular intervals and that this periodicity can be traced to a peculiarity in the arrangement of electrons round the appropriate nuclei. This faith in unity and harmony enables him to reconcile irreconcilables and make a synthesis of opposites.

Although Rabindranath preaches a message of freedom, he is keenly alive to the value of bondage which alone

makes freedom possible. The Sanyasi in *Nature's Revenge* came to understand that if he broke away from all bondage, he would fly into nothingness itself. Freedom means, no doubt, freedom from bondage, but it must be realized in bondage. It is only when the string is bound to the harp that there is the creation of music. If the string is not drawn tight, the music is spoilt, too. Life realizes its freedom in the midst of bonds just as the string and the harp realize it in being bound to each other. If God were absolutely free there would be no creation. That is why the Vaishnavas boldly declared that God has bound Himself to the universe of His own creation. He is apart from it but also in it, His freedom is being constantly expressed through the fetters He is forging. God is infinite and eternal, but His infinity and eternity are achieved in time and space through endless forms.

If God is continually revealing Himself through a succession of endless forms is He, as Bergson argues, only a perpetual Becoming? Rabindranath dissents from this view and pleads for a synthesis of Being and Becoming. Brahma is Brahma, but we have to become Brahma, the final truth lies, therefore, in the river of Becoming losing itself in the sea of Being. This may be called the *lila* or the manifestation of the Supreme Person, which has been misunderstood both in the East and in the West. Western science, with its emphasis on action has evolved a metaphysic of Becoming which is as incomplete as the metaphysic of Being which Eastern philosophy with its insistence on contemplation has formulated. The caste system of India is a glaring example of this misunderstanding of the fundamental truth of life. Originally designed as an experiment in the achievement of unity in diversity, this system failed to take note of the mutability which is the law of life. In the West, the soul of man has been constantly engaged in expanding outwards and it has expressed itself in a metaphysic that talks of the evolution of God Himself, forgetting that there is peace at the heart of endless agitation. "It is

because of this insistence on the doing and the becoming that we perceive in the West the intoxication of power" (*Sadhana*)

From the point of view enunciated above, the opposition between illusion and truth is not irreconcilable, rather it is in truth that illusion merges itself 'Even illusion is true as illusion' (*Sadhana*) The things of the world may be *maya*, but without appearance reality cannot exist, and it may, indeed, be said that without illusion, truth itself would be empty Rabindranath is prepared to accept the world as an appearance, illusion or *maya*, but he reminds us that its illusoriness is also part of its reality, it is what it seems to be, and what it seems to be it is We may go a step further and say that it is through the world of appearance that the Absolute expresses itself and it is by reaching forward to the Absolute that illusion justifies its existence From the artist's point of view, then, the final truth consists in the rhythm through which life manifests itself in the dance of *is* and *is not*, of reality and illusion

Such a comprehensive philosophy finds an appropriate place for death in the scheme of life If death is looked upon by itself, then it is pure negation of life, an absolute blankness But if it is related to life, then in the rhythm of birth, death and rebirth, it finds its proper place as the gateway through which life perpetually renews itself "Life as a whole never takes death seriously It laughs, dances and plays, it builds and laughs in death's face" (*Sadhana*) Rabindranath had to experience many sorrows—in the deaths of his sister in law, wife and children and other near and dear ones, indeed, the early years of the twentieth century he called a "death time" for him But he was never dismayed by these catastrophes, for he felt that death was swallowed up in victory After the death of Jyotirindra Nath's wife, he saw that his sorrow only enabled him to view the beauty of nature in a more correct perspective His attachment to the world was relaxed, he no longer looked at things in the grabbing spirit of a man eager to

possess things firmly. Death gave him a sense of freedom, and he came to realize the deeper meaning of the beauty of the world. Later on, he reached the conclusion that death was merely the fulfilment and completion of life, that in death nothing is lost and that it is only the channel through which life can maintain its ceaseless flow.

If the rhythm of life requires the presence of death, it is not difficult to account for the existence of evil or imperfection or of ugliness which, like death, must not be taken as a separate entity. Creation is a ceaseless process which is gradually perfecting itself, and if life is viewed as a whole it will be found that 'unbroken perfection is over all'. It is only when we detach a part of life and see it by itself that it appears to be imperfect, for imperfection is indistinguishable from incompleteness. Life's tragedies give a rude shaking to our sensibilities, but life as a whole is tremendously optimistic. The tragedies are only a part of the rhythm through which the joy of life asserts itself.

The same rhythmic harmony which is the truth of life when life is viewed ethically or metaphysically governs an individual's relation to society and the universe. The first consciousness of personality is a consciousness of separateness, a man begins to know himself only by distinguishing himself from others. This is the assertion of self, but it is only the negative side of man's personality. It is incomplete, man realizes his personality in its fulness only when he knows himself as a part of a larger organism. My world is unlike another man's world, this is a fact which none can ignore, but it is not wholly unlike his world and that is a fact which is equally significant. Moreover, I am bound to other men and the larger world of matter through a variety of relations, and it is this relatedness that expresses the positive side of my personality.

## V

If life is harmony, what is the law or principle governing its rhythm? This law or principle is one of love.

and joy Rabindranath frees life from the mechanism of cause and effect or of means and ends The infinite and the finite meet in a perpetual embrace which is its own justification When the individual personality is united to men and things external to itself, it has no ulterior purpose in view It only means freedom from selfish motives, it is a union of love and its effect is one of joy This spirit of love dwells in the region of the surplus, and the gladness it generates is the one criterion of truth A man knows the truth about himself only when he realizes his personality in some one outside himself, and this relation is a relation of love which gives joy because it is the signal of his freedom from the burden of selfishness The scientist, who is eager to find the links of causality, traces the laws connecting isolated facts and thus discovers unity in diversity But his researches only take him from the 'tyranny of facts' to the 'tyranny of law' His real freedom will come if he can realize himself in those laws, and that realization is a realization of love Love is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science, it is the hallmark of truth

Love is the secret not only of truth but also of beauty Dissenting from critics who think that beauty is the aim of art, Rabindranath looks upon it as only the instrument through which the unity of life expresses itself Beauty and truth are intimately related to each other, indeed, one of these may be said to be the complement of the other Truth finds the law governing facts, and beauty completes the attainment of truth by discovering the spirit of love which unites one thing to another As Rabindranath himself puts it, "The stream which comes from the Infinite and flows towards the finite—that is the True, the Good, it is subject to laws definite in form Its echo which returns towards the Infinite is Beauty and Joy, which are difficult to touch or grasp, and so make us beside ourselves (*My Reminiscences*)

Beauty, like everything else, must observe the laws of

rhythm, for it is the product of joy which, being kept under restraint, cannot be either wild or extravagant. Joy or *Ananda* must be checked by the ascetic's *tapasya* or penance. The best expression of love and beauty in literature is to be found in Kalidasa's *Kumar Sambhavam* and *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, where the heroine's love has to pass through a rigid process of purification and is fulfilled in motherhood. And, indeed, from the purely technical point of view, too, art means the creation of beauty through the sacrifice of matter to form. Rabindranath's objection to European music is that it tends to give direct expression to emotion, which, he thinks, should only be used by the artist as material for the creation of significant form. (*Rolland and Tagore*) It is only when emotion has been thus controlled by plastic imagination, when matter surrenders itself to form that art can produce beauty and give joy and peace.

I have elsewhere \* commented on the limitations of an aesthetic that excludes the vast field of utility from art and confines it to the region of the surplus. It may be sufficient to note here that Rabindranath cannot find any room for ugliness in life as he finds it difficult also to assign a place to untruth. For him truth and beauty are omnipresent, representing respectively, the law and the harmony of the universe. So there can be no ugliness or untruth in life, it is man's incapacity to see life as a whole that gives rise to untruth and ugliness. Untruth and ugliness, on this view, are found only in our comprehension as the negative elements of truth and beauty. If man can get over his selfishness and view things in a detached manner, if, in other words, he can raise them to the region of the surplus he can have "the true vision of beauty that is everywhere."

## VI

A study of Rabindranath's poetry should be preceded by an acquaintance with his ideas, because not only does

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\* *The Art of Bernard Shaw* (Oxford University Press), Chapter III



he preach the lesson of harmony and unity but all his works form a compact whole in which the message is indissolubly wedded to the form. When his poems were first published in England, Western critics were amazed, amongst other things, at the "harmony of emotion and idea", for here they found a religion which is not divorced from philosophy, and a poetry which is akin to prophecy. The ideas he preaches are clothed in significant images which show his distinctiveness as a poet. First amongst these is his portrait of *Jivan Devata*. Some amongst Rabindranath's detractors say that his poetry, particularly, his religious poetry gives us little beyond what we get in the *Book of Psalms* and the Gospels or in *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* translated by Rabindranath himself. It is not our purpose to cry down the literary beauties of either Kabir's poems or of the Authorized Version. But it is necessary to point out that although there are obvious similarities both in thought and imagery between Rabindranath's poetry and the Gospels or the Psalms or Kabir's songs, the differences are fundamental. What strikes Ernest Rhys in reading *Gitanjali* 'is that the heavenly desire is qualified by an almost childlike reliance on the affections, and at times by a womanly tenderness'. "A mystic?" asks a reviewer, writing on *The King of the Dark Chamber*, "What kind of mystic is this who hymns the passion of love, youth, motherhood, in an ecstasy of the senses?" (*The Manchester Guardian*). This peculiar combination of sensuousness and mysticism is reflected in the image of *Jivan Devata*, and it is necessary, first of all, to understand this doctrine and this image if we are to judge Rabindranath's poetry.

It will be profitable to dispose of two heresies before elucidating the concept of *Jivan Devata*. One is that *Jivan Devata*, appeared in a particular phase of the poet's life and then disappeared, and the other is that *Jivan Devata*, the Lord of life is intensely personal and should not be identified with God. *Jivan Devata* finds the first clear expression in some poems written in the early nineties

but he appears unmistakably in such poems as *Gitanjali* 65 (What divine drink wouldst thou have, my God, from this overflowing cup of my life?), and his voice is heard equally distinctly in the Boatman poem (*Fruit Gathering*-41) and in *Lover's Gift* 39 (There is a looker on who sits behind my eyes) These poems were written in 1914-16, and when Rabindranath delivered the Hibbert Lectures in 1930, he referred to his *Jivan Devata* poetry in elucidating his religion In the poem he wrote on his impending death, he said-

In front lies the Ocean of peace  
Launch the boat, Helmsman  
You will be the comrade ever,  
Take, O take, him in your lap

Both in sentiment and imagery these lines are reminiscent of the earlier *Jivan Devata* poems It is one of the distinctive features of Rabindranath's view of life that he looks upon the Supreme Person as comprehending the individual and the universe, and the Supreme Person manifests himself in those yearnings of the individual which connect him with the larger world lying beyond, the intimations of immortality being only radiations from the centre to the circumference The Lord of the poet's life shades off into the Lord of the universe, and the Boatman comes from the other shore, crossing the wild sea to meet her who watched alone at night with her lamp burning

Who is *Jivan Devata*? He is the guide of the poet's life, "who is joyfully leading (the poet) through all its obstacles, antagonisms and crookedness towards the fulfilment of its innermost meaning" But Rabindranath, who is a believer in unity or harmony and in love as the principle of harmony, does not look upon the guide as distinct from the human self There is "he says in *My Reminiscences*, "a duality in man Of the inner person, behind the outward current of thoughts, feelings and events, but little is known or recked but for all that, he cannot be got rid of as a

factor in life's progress." It is the apotheosis of this inner self which may be called *Jivan-Devata* or the Lord of life. A part of the poet's self, he is yet far off from him. Around all human facts there is an atmosphere of expectation; man always strives to be greater than he is; he feels that left to himself, he is a fragment of finitude and that his bliss lies in union with the Infinite. It is this longing that gives man his assurance of immortality.

For this belief in a larger life Rabindranath finds support both in ancient religion and modern science. Modern science has shown that life as we find it in man is not a sudden creation but the result of a ceaseless evolution which may be traced to dim stirrings in the physical universe. If that is so, the human soul, although in many respects a unique thing, is allied to stocks and stones, for it is out of them that it has grown. Life is immanent in matter and has transcended it. The Indian theory of re-incarnation tells us that an individual passes through innumerable births in which his soul may inhabit different bodies. If that is so, the poet may reasonably claim that in the dim past, he was a part of the world of matter which felt the first dim pulsations of life; in previous births he witnessed the evolution of life out of matter, and in future incarnations he will be one with the larger life of the universe. This shows that the poet has at one and the same time two selves, one the limited self of this incarnation and the other the larger self which lies at the centre of his innermost being, guides him to his destiny and connects him with the world beyond him. This self is of him and yet not of him. It is the lord of the poet's soul, but also its lover, for Rabindranath accepts love as the fundamental principle of life.

The above explanation of *Jivan-Devata* is incomplete, because it takes note only of the individual soul and its yearning. But God would be incomplete if He had to rest only in Himself. Not only does the human soul aspire for union with God, but God, too, has the same feeling for the

individual human being as the bridegroom may have for the bride or the boatman for the passenger he ferries across the river. The universe is God's *lila* in the sense that He delights in it as a player in his sport, but it is also a work of art through which God the artist is constantly expressing Himself. The *Jivan Devata* ' has seen under new veils the face of the one beloved in twilight hours of many a nameless star (*Lover's Gift*—39). But he is also the Supreme One who comprehends the universe and unites all things, and men through the perfect relationship of love. This Supreme Being, who is the source of life, seeks his best expression in an individual's experiences uniting them into an ever widening personality which is the foundation of both art and religion. In *The Religion of Man*, the poet refers to his Great Illumination and says, "I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man, in which the infinite became defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and co-operation." This is the truth of *Jivan Devata*, who is not merely the guide of Rabindranath's life but also the Lord of the universe, and who is defined not only through his manifestation in the poet but also through all other things of the world.

## VII

It is Rabindranath's Western admirers who first drew pointed attention to the open air spirit of his poetry, to that affinity to the fundamental things of life which gives it universality of significance. Although not lacking in sublimity of thought and feeling and richness of diction and imagery, this poetry is allied to folk poetry in its insistent references to common things and common people—flowers and fruits, rivers and ferries, clouds and rains, the sky and its stars, boatmen and beggars, travellers on the road and shepherds with their flutes. Not only does Rabindranath draw on natural objects for descriptive images but he also finds human significance in the physical universe. As a poet

he has discovered the secret of the world and revealed the reason why the lily is pale for the moon's love and the lotus draws her veil aside before the morning sun. (*Lover's Gift*—17). For him the meaning of life lies in a universal inter-relatedness, and he has not merely shown the secret affinity between one object in nature and another, but looked upon the commonest physical things as symbols of man's passions, longings and ideals.

It is no wonder that Rabindranath should find in nature the key to the meaning of life. Objects in the physical world are certainly useful to man, but their beauty is in excess of their utility; it has its place in the region of the surplus. God is able to add beauty to the usefulness of things only because He has leisure and because He takes delight in His work. Secondly, objects in nature, the vast sky no less than the small flowers, have grown spontaneously, without the intervention of any machinery. They reveal God not only in His joyousness but also in his creative freedom; He can create only because He is not the slave of any useful purpose and because He gives expression to His spontaneous will. Thirdly, it is a scientific truth that the process of creation in nature is continuous; it started in the unfathomed past and it will end nobody knows when; thus nature supplies the poet with the best proof that the eternal and the infinite are real.

The simplest example of creative vitality in nature is the small flower which grows and fades and then renews itself in the dust. It is a common but not a commonplace thing. No amount of scientific analysis can explain why the flower should grow; no useful purpose is served by its beauty and the queen's gardener has no duty except the service of her idle days. Thus the growth of a small flower in the midnight best-represents the vast mystery of creation. It is born in darkness, out of the travail of the earth in an environment of thorns, and since no reason can be given for its advent, the poet is justified in thinking that it is the embodiment of the dreams of the grass and that the seed

finds its fulfilment in the sprout, the bud in the flower and *the flower in the fruit*. The seed does not know the sprout nor the bud the flower, that is why the fulfilment which is expressed in the evolution of a flower is the completion of a longing for the unknown, the far off.

This fulfilment which is causeless and purposeless is a fulfilment in love and joy. It represents the triumph of beauty and joy over pain, and the victory of the rose over the environment is the victory of life over brutishness, it is the spirit of life which quickens with love the languid forests, and they are overwhelmed with the floral outburst of spring. It is because of this inherent power of love that the bridegroom is greeted with a floral garland, and man's worship of God is accompanied by a gift of flowers. Although it will strain the suggestiveness of a symbol too far, it may be said that the secret treasure of honey in the flower is like the hidden sap of vitality in humanity and that its hundred petals represent life's expansiveness.

Although a flower is beautiful, it is extremely frail, its power being hidden in its frailty. It has taken God centuries to perfect small, wild flowers which bloom all the way, held by the restraint of their own beauty. A flower lasts only for a day but is immediately replaced by its successor. Here we have the rhythm of life and death and see how individual lives are surrendered so that life may renew itself in a perpetual ecstasy of forms. The flower is apparently simple, but even its sensuous appeal is extremely complex. It is soft, beautiful and fragrant, and although it is tuneless, it carries in its silence God's own melodies. Its beauty is possibly God's answer to the theory that phenomenal life is *maya*, for earth's flowers of illusion are kept eternally fresh by death.

## VIII

The odour cries in the bud as a prisoner within his cell, and as it bursts its bonds, the bud becomes a flower.

which is the symbol not merely of love and joy but also of freedom. But the spirit of freedom is best represented by light which at dawn rends the veil from the face of the bud. Night throws off her shackles, walls break asunder, light pours in and death dies in a burst of splendour. Looked at from this point of view, the daily advent of morning is not a mere incident, repeating itself with tireless monotony, but a perpetual surprise, for it is a major event in the drama of life in which light triumphs over darkness, freedom over bondage. "Do not say, It is morning, and dismiss it with a name of yesterday. See it for the first time as a new born child that has no name."

Although light is the symbol of freedom, the darkness of life is not to be cast aside as mere fetters. It is in the darkness of the night that the light of the world loses itself. It is darkness which preserves the secret of life in its veiled sky and its hoarded bird songs, and it is there that we must seek the key to the mystery of creation. Not only are the peace and the silence of the night charged with life's meaning which may be lost sight of in the garish day, but darkness is perpetually sailing towards light, thus renewing life through death. It is because of the ceaseless marching of darkness towards light that the poet thus apostrophizes Night, 'Take me up on thy chariot without wheels, running noiselessly from world to world, thou queen in the palace of time, thou darkly beautiful!' (*Fruit Gathering*—20)

The dark beauty of night not only contains the key to the mystery of life but supplies also the appropriate background for the wedding of the bridegroom and the bride. Even when the poet feels that he has been defeated, he imagines his defeat as a bride whom the Master will woo at night when darkness will throb with awe because of the tryst. And since God's presence can be felt rather than seen, the mystical poet imagines Him as the King of the Dark Chamber whom Queen Sudarshana courts as a bridegroom hidden from sight. It is only when she has been able to know him in the darkness that he says, "I open the doors

of this dark room today—the game is finished here! Come, come with me now, come outside—*into the light!*

Not only is darkness mysteriously beautiful, but it is also terrible, and that is why the Destroyer is imagined as hiding himself behind the veil of night, and the storm is God's own signal. The opposition between darkness and light, between the terrible and the frail is not the final truth, because they are only part of the rhythm of life and contribute to the ultimate impression of harmony. That is why the King of the Dark Chamber, who is both pitiless and kind, has a banner in which the thunderstone which defies darkness is painted in the heart of a lotus, and though God's judgement is stored in the morning light, his forgiveness bursts in storms that scatter the thefts of the greedy in the dust. (*Fruit Gathering—36*)

The chief glory of night is in its stars which illumine its darkness and look like anklets of light. The stars are symbols of freedom, love and joy, they are like flowers blossoming in the sky, and they seem also to pour forth God's own melodies. They are far off from man to whom they bring light from an incalculable distance, they have been engaged in their vigil from time immemorial and with their silence, their age and their vastness they are fit symbols for immensity and eternity. They are like heaven's lamps, and the poet easily finds a similarity and a contrast between man's earthen lamp with its association of intimacy and heaven's carnival of lamps which serve the same purpose but suggest vaster associations. When man's frail lamp is broken, the stars continue to shine on, but it is man's pride that even when the mighty stars are hidden behind clouds he has his frail lamp to dispel darkness and give him guidance. It is not merely in the mingling of light and darkness that the stars suggest the rhythm of life, for there is yet another point of view from which the meaning of life may be read into them. The stars seem to be fixed bodies, and the vast space intervening between them indicates the pang of separation which expresses itself in an



infinity of forms But we know that stars, too, are moving and it may be assumed that the attraction one star exercises on another is an attraction of love

The stars are silent and peaceful and so is the immense sky which is their home It is in the horizon that all things seem to meet, and that is why the blue sky which appears to be both far off and near is suggestive of the infinity majesty and tenderness of God, and death may be looked upon as only a passage from known to unknown skies The clouds which float in the sky and the winds which move them represent the joyous vagrancy and the freedom in which lies the significance of life Rabindranath's imagination is stirred specially by the movement of birds which fly away from the narrow sphere of the earth but which always seek a home Their flight in the sky is indicative of the large freedom man longs for but cannot attain but the wings of a home-seeking bird in the dusk remind the poet of the sweeping energy of human passion And God is both the nest and the sky for man

## IX

A flock of birds flinging their flight like an arrow among stars is for the poet an emblem of the passion for speed which is in the heart of the universe, which makes darkness thrill into fire as the stars wing by That the migrant world seeks a home of rest hidden in the Far away is one of the leading themes in Rabindranath's poetry, it is *no wonder, therefore that here there are many other images* suggestive of the ceaseless flow and elusiveness of life The symbol which occurs most frequently is of a current of water and Life is portrayed as the Eternal Fugitive round whose bodiless rush stagnant space frets into eddying bubbles of light

The river is bounded on two sides by banks and the man who is on one side has to go to the other on a boat In the folk songs of India as well as in literary poetry the

journey of life has often been compared to passing along a stream and the ferryman is Death or God. Rabindranath accepts the traditional imagery but makes it the vehicle of his own ideology. The ferryman started his job in the dim past and has been doing it ever since. He represents, therefore, the permanence of the common occupations of life as against the impermanence of empires. He is also the symbol of *Jivan Devata*, the Lord of his life, who attracts men with the lure of the far away, for it is he alone who knows the secret of the other shore. Another image which Rabindranath employs to express this idea is that of the open road which leads to strange countries and makes the heart wistful. The traveller reads an awful incantation in the sky and the irresistible call of the unknown makes him break his bonds and launch out his boat and start on the King's road. And the eternal question asked of the boatman or the traveller is 'Where do you go, and to what home, to garner your sheaves?'

The far off goal towards which the river moves is the shoreless sea which in its darkness and silence seems to be the custodian of the secret for which the waterfall or the river rushes forth into the unknown. But when the sea is tossed by tempest and its waves are tumultuous it becomes an emblem not of the placid assurance of truth but of an eternal question which it puts to the skies. In the sea and in the wind there is the call of the eternal Stranger, and when the vast ocean lifts its arms to the infinite sky for the unattainable we have in that desire for union the answer to the riddle of life. The steersman, who sits at the helm of the boat, ever eludes the passenger but he is to be known by the thrill in the darkness by the whisper of the unseen word and by the breath of the unknown shore.

## CHAPTER IV

### NEW MYTHS OUT OF OLD

#### I

It has been shown in the foregoing chapter how Rabindranath's philosophy of life is expressed through analogies and apologues drawn from the common things of life—from rivers and flowers, stars and skies. One reason why his poetry has such universal significance is that his images are of things which all men in all ages have seen and known, and that is why his poetry, so mystical, so full of surprises, and so much charged with significance for the complex problems of modern life, has yet the simplicity and directness of ancient folk-songs. He draws not only on the fundamental things of life but also on ancient Indian cults, legends and tales and reads into them a new meaning that has universal appeal. His mythopoeic imagination makes fresh myths of Urvashi and Ahalya, who figure so prominently in ancient Indian legend, and a wicked *Chandal* (untouchable) girl is turned by the poet's sympathy into a symbol of eternal womanhood, ministering to man's needs and claiming his love. Ancient Indian tales and doctrines thus become the vehicle of Rabindranath's ideas of peace, joy, beauty, love and harmony.

In the Hindu hierarchy of gods Shiva occupies a prominent position, being regarded as *Mahadeva*, the God of gods or the Great God. He is Rudra, the terrible and yet he represents peace and goodness. He is the Lord of the universe and his wife Annapurna is the goddess of fulness; yet he is a beggar with an alms-bowl, roaming about funeral pyres clad in tiger-skin. Sir R. G. Bhandarkar traces the origin of Shaivism to man's fear of storms and other terrible phenomena which are attributed to the fury of a God whom the ancient Aryans called Rudra, the wrathful God of the

malignant forces in nature. But man learns to escape the fury of nature by appealing to the dreadful God and the destroyer of the universe is soon identified with its preserver and creator. In later mythology occurs the story of his wooing of Uma, the daughter of the Himalayas, which is celebrated by Kalidasa in his *Kumar Sambhavam* (*The Birth of the War God*). Uma tried to fascinate the great God when he had withdrawn from the universe and was engaged in ascetic austerities. As the mighty God felt that his meditation was being disturbed by the intrusion of love, a flame burst from his eyes and destroyed Eros and Uma retired in frustration. Later on she herself performed severe penance which pleased Shiva who accepted her as his bride, and *Kartikeya*, the War God was the child of this union.

Another story of Shiva is that when his wife Sati (Uma) committed suicide, he roamed over the universe like a mad man, with dishevelled hair from which flows the holy Ganges, and dancing the dance of doom. Indeed, all legends of Shiva dwell on his dancing, and in South India especially he is worshipped as Nataraja, the king of dancers. Different parts of the image (such as the raised foot and the outstretched arms) standing for different aspects of God. Without going into the details of symbolic interpretation, we may say that the dance of Nataraja represents the work of cosmic energy in creating, maintaining and destroying the universe.

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Creation, destruction and then creation again—these are shadowed forth by the cosmic dance of Nataraja, and it is this aspect of the Shiva cult which has appealed most to Rabindranath who enriches it with a new significance. Many poets have been struck by the quality of permanence in the beauties of nature. All that is past is not dead and Keats, contrasting the transitoriness of the fever and the fret of human life with the eternal life of beauty, exclaims

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird"

Rabindranath goes deeper into the roots of beauty and recreates the Nataraja myth to express the eternal rhythm

of life and death. In *The Cycle of Spring* he seems to be groping in vain for an appropriate symbol for change and changelessness. Winter is old, and it dies to be re-born as spring, but the story of the play is that the eternal Old Man does not exist, or in other words, behind grey winter Spring always maintains the freshness of its youth and the Heralds of Spring thus sing to Winter:

We shall bind you in flower chains  
Where spring keeps his captives,  
For we know you carry your jewels of youth  
Hidden in your grey rags.

The above portraiture is obviously incomplete, and when it is found that the Old Man for whom a strenuous search is made is only a dream, the poetic effect is attenuated; it seems that Rabindranath has not yet found an apposite symbol that may express the idea of birth and death and re-birth, of permanence in impermanence.

The Nataraja myth gave him what he had been looking for. Here he found the cult of a divine dancer who not only destroys but also preserves and creates, and the movements of the dancer are an adequate medium for the expression of cosmic energy which seeks unity in variety. The first point to note about the divine dancer (as of all other dancers) is that the movement of the body is a process of self-revelation; it is the *lila* of the God which is expressed in creation, and suns and planets are only anklets of light twirling round his feet. The most significant thing about expression for a writer like Rabindranath is the dominance of form over matter, which attains a degree of perfection in dancing unapproachable in any other art except music. It is this aspect of Nataraja's *lila* which Rabindranath sees in the universe where at the time of his dance rebellious atoms are subdued into form and inert matter begins to vibrate with life. It is the dance movements of Nataraja which account for the change of the seasons, the asceticism of

summer, the ripeness of autumn, the pallor of winter and the vigour of spring being different expressions of the same divine artist. Here we have a splendid poetic symbol for the changeful and the changeless in nature, for although the dancer's movements are fugitive, the dancer himself is permanent, and as the same movements are repeated in dancing, it is easy to see why Nataraja makes the seasonal beauties reappear at regular intervals, showing "the resurgence of undefeated life born of dissolution." The idea of permanence in the midst of change appears in many poems of Rabindranath written before its final expression in the Nataraja myth. In the closing poem of *The Gardener*, he addresses the reader who may read his poems "an hundred years hence" and who may care for his poetry, not because there is any special excellence in it but because the spring whose glory he is singing of now will be the same spring that will greet her, and through his poetry she will gather fragrant memories of the vanished flowers of a hundred years before. When the poet feels too deeply the separation between his age and Kalidasa's, he is consoled by the thought that April brings to him the same flowers with which Kalidasa's heroines decked their hair, and the same south breeze fluttered their veils as whispers over modern roses (*The Fugitive* I—ix). The full significance of these and many other poems becomes clear when they are read in the context of the Nataraja myth as re-created by Rabindranath.

Ancient Indian tradition has it that the holy Ganges had been hidden in the locks of Shiva and that, once upon a time, when King Bhagiratha pleased the great God by his penance, he allowed the sacred stream to flow on the earth, and that is why one name of the Ganges is Bhagirathi. Rabindranath, who believes that freedom is at the root of divine creation, interprets this myth in his own characteristic manner. Without making any mention of Bhagirathi, he looks upon the gushing stream only as a symbol of deliverance, the result of the creative ecstasy of

the divine dancer. Art is the product of both freedom and restraint. The swing of Nataraja's feet brings order in the midst of rebellious atoms, but it also awakens stars in the depth of night, frees the stream imprisoned in the matted locks and makes it wander in amazement, seeking the unattainable.

It is little wonder that Rabindranath should read his own symbolist meaning into the story of the marriage of Shiva and Uma, which is the union of the Terrible and the Frail. One of the names of Shiva is Mahakala which may be translated as Great Time, for he represents, as Ernest Rhys says, "the immovable amid the flux of things, eternity in the midst of time." It is Rabindranath's distinctiveness as poet and thinker that in the wooing of Shiva and Uma he finds harmony between the delicacy of fleeting earthly beauty and the grim austerities of the eternal ascetic. He gives a new explanation of the disturbance caused by Uma in Shiva's meditations and of the burning of Eros. In Rabindranath's imagination, the burning of Eros and Shiva's subsequent surrender are not primordial incidents which happened nobody knows when; the drama of Uma's courtship and her rejection and final acceptance by Shiva is being enacted in endless time on the vast stage of life. The spring days of youth remain imprisoned in the matted locks of the ascetic, who, having destroyed Eros, roams about in cemeteries and passes his time in deep contemplation. Creation seems to be dead and the gods conspire to make him remember youth and *spring which lie hidden within himself*. The poet is the messenger of the gods, who makes Shiva deliver beauty and love from the bondage of winter, revive Eros, respond to Uma's courtship and release the holy stream. Once again he will burn Eros, once again spring will yield to cold winter and dry Indian summer and once again the stream will become quiet and the ascetic lose himself in deep meditation. Thus this meditation realizes itself in its own destruction, for Eros appears with renewed vitality, rebel-



lous youth is freed, and boisterous spring has its cycle once, once more For Rabindranath this is the inner significance of the stories of Shiva, Uma, Eros and Lycoris, and these stories, read from this point of view, supply him with the most comprehensive symbol for the expression of his ideas

## II

Shiva is also called Bholanath or the Ever Forgetful and as children are absent minded, they are often affectionately nicknamed Bholanath Rabindranath has written a number of lyrics celebrating childhood, and named the book *Sisu Bholanath*, tracing similarity between the Child and Shiva, for like a child the Great God makes his toys and breaks them in mere play, like a child he becomes free by rending the webs of his own weaving (*Poems—63*) This unconcern and this freedom are characteristics of divine *lila*, but in Indian religion and legend the concept of *lila* is associated not so much with Shiva as with Krishna who is the preserver of the universe rather than its destroyer And Krishna's doings are the principal theme of Bengali Vaishnava poetry which exercised such a deep influence on Rabindranath

Religious tradition says that Krishna incarnated himself as a shepherd (literally cowherd) in Vrindaban and there many shepherdesses fell in love with him chief amongst these being Radha, the wife of Ayan Ghosh The drama of love between Krishna and Radha is God's *lila* in Vrindaban, Radha, who surrenders everything including a wife's duty and good name, being typical of the human soul and the terrestrial universe yearning with reckless passion for union with God When the divine shepherd plays on his flute, Radha becomes restless and considers no sacrifice too great for the bliss of a meeting with her lover Rabindranath transforms this story of sensuous passion and mystical longing, enlarging its significance and appeal For

him the divine shepherd is neither a human lover nor a particular deity, but the great Unknown who is loftier than any individual person, and the call of the flute symbolizes the message which the Infinite is constantly sending to the finite world. It is the elusive but irresistible call, not subtleties of passion that becomes the dominant theme with Rabindranath, and his poetry is saved from the "excessive emotionalism" or "the tendency to an exclusively anthropomorphic devotion" which Miss Evelyn Underhill rightly points out as the defect of poems that spring from an unrestricted cult of Divine personality. (Introduction to *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*).

Vaishnavite critics of Rabindranath often complain that his poetry has not the intense vitality that distinguishes the work of his Vaishnava predecessors. What they fail to note is that the significance of Rabindranath's poetry is larger and more complex, and that the intensity of passion to be found here is intensity of a different kind. He does not analyse and decorate Radha's passion in the same way as does either Chandidas or Vidyapati, for the simple reason that the divine shepherd has for him a more transcendent significance than for the Vaishnava poets, and he looks upon yearning passion as only part of the rhythm of life. The wider and more mystical appeal of Rabindranath may be understood if we consider a simple poem like "I was walking, by the road, I know not why?" (*The Gardener—14*) in which Vaishnava imagery comes only incidentally. Says the poet,

"Years ago it was a day of breezy March when the murmur of the spring was languorous, and mango blossoms were dropping on the dust.

"The rippling water leapt and licked the brass vessel on the landing-step."

"I think of that day of breezy March, I do not know why." The theme of this poem is the mysterious restlessness of the speaker, which has communicated itself to nature and is faintly reminiscent of Radha's passion. It has an

intensity of its own, but this intensity is different from the fervour with which the love of Krishna and Radha is portrayed in Vaishnava literature. The portraiture of passion by the Vaishnava poets is simpler and more poignant but Rabindranath's poetry of love is more suggestive and more intricate.

One of the best examples of the complex appeal of Rabindranath's poetry is found in those poems in which there is a combination of Shaiva and Vaishnava imagery. Vaishnava poetry is remarkable for its sweetness, but for Rabindranath the Infinite is not only sweet but also terrible, the thunderstone is painted, as we know, in the heart of the lotus in the banner of the King of the Dark Chamber. Such a mixture of tenderness and sternness is inherent in those images in which he invokes Shiva the ascetic God, imagining him as a shepherd or cowherd as the Vaishnavas imagine Krishna, being *Mahakala* or Eternity, this ascetic shepherd tends the flock of days constituting time. This mingling of Shaivism and Vaishnavism becomes clearer in those poems of his in which the two Gods are invoked side by side, and softness quickly hardens into grimness or the ascetic is suddenly inspired by minstrelsy. When at noon time on a summer day the bird ceases to sing, the divine shepherd plays on his flute and the divine ascetic, the terrible Shiva, being moved by the sweet music, feels that the restless breeze is wafting towards him the jingling of a maiden's bracelets. It seems that the grisly hermit practises meditation with a view to attaining that sweetness which is the inalienable possession of Krishna, it is in this union that Rabindranath finds the fulness of God. Thompson refers to poem no 42 in *Utsarga* in which the divine lover is apostrophized in different garbs, first as a young flute player and then as a grim ascetic with an iron rod in his hand and with water dripping from his hair.

It is in the midst of a storm at night that the poet invokes Shiva, the "tremendous lover," but a tryst in dark

ness and rain occurs more frequently in Vaishnava poetry than in Shaiva legend and literature. The rainy season is a recurrent theme with Rabindranath who, taking a hint from Kalidasa's *Meghadutam*, endows it with a new significance. During the rains in July people cannot stir out of their homes. But it is on such days and such nights that a man feels lonely and longs to go out and meet the beloved, and in Vaishnava poetry there are frequent references to Radha making nothing of danger and going out under the shelter of darkness to have stolen interviews with Krishna. This loneliness and this desire for union Rabindranath looks upon as characteristics of universal life, human and terrestrial and the errant clouds of the rainy season appear to him to be charged with the message of the unknown which makes the heart wistful. The pang of separation which the stars feel as they gaze at one another becomes lyric among rustling leaves in the rainy darkness of July. In the busy moments of noontide work the poet is with the crowd, but on dark lonely days when clouds heap upon clouds it is only for the far away lover that his soul pines in pensive loneliness.

### III

Ahalya and Urvasi—two women famous in Indian legend—have been transformed and recreated by Rabindranath in what are amongst the greatest poems of the world. The traditional story of Ahalya is that she was the wife of the sage Gautama who was teacher to Indra, the lord of Paradise. During Gautama's absence, Indra appeared to Ahalya in the shape of her husband and committed adultery with her. When on his return, Gautama knew of the adultery, he pronounced the curse that she be turned into stone, but when she pleaded that her offence was due to ignorance he modified the ban saying that when centuries after, Rama's feet would touch the stone to which she would be transformed, she would come back to life.

We know Plautus made a comedy out of a similar story in Hellenic legends, which was imitated by Molière and Dryden. In Indian mythology, we have a story of purgation and Ahalya is now among the five holy women who should always be remembered with veneration. Rabindranath makes of the legend of Ahalya a complex symbol of the emergence of life out of matter, recreating the ancient myth against the background of modern scientific research and in the light of his own humanism.

Life and matter seem to be antagonistic, but they are not unrelated, for it is out of matter that the living cell has come, and just as the earth required centuries to become sufficiently cool for the growth of vegetation, so also rocks and stones had waited for ages before living animals and man appeared. The first emergence of life may have been due to an accident or to the agency of a Life Force or it is possible that just as man with his complex organism has grown out of the unicellular protoplasm so the protoplasm itself has evolved out of stocks and stones in which consciousness lies dormant or in an atrophied state. Ahalya appeals to Rabindranath's imagination because in her story mythology supplies an example of that harmony of spirit and matter which for him is the basis of truth. Ahalya had taste of that larger life in Nature which gives man his faith in immortality, and yet, even in her adamant existence, she retained a capacity for feeling which is the foundation of human personality. During the period of the curse her life was larger than man's and deeper than Nature's.

Bergson thinks that the evolution of life means the development of spontaneous activity in inert matter, the growth of freedom in the region of determinism. This presupposes an antagonism between the living and the non-living which is unacceptable to Rabindranath who imagines the earth as a mother in whose expansive breast Ahalya found shelter and peace. The curse which struck Ahalya meant an extension of her consciousness not

only in space but also in time. She lay down in the dumb immense where she was lapped by the sea of life; ages passed by, and when she awoke from her trance, she was as young as the new-born flowers but also as old as the hills. Being a part of mother earth, she had her full share of earth's vastness, and felt the thrill of the sun's kiss or the fluttering of the leaves with an intensity which is denied to other human beings.

The poet is not, however, blind to Ahalya's individual life or its problem, and, indeed, the most important thing about his reconstruction of the legend is the human significance he reads into it. Rabindranath takes Ahalya as a really sinful woman who must have responded to Indra's advances not so much in ignorance as in tumultuous passion, but the long penance washes her pure and she blossoms forth again into perfect life. It is as a human being that she bore the curse and passed through the process of purgation in which she watched the movements of men, and the earth became more beautiful and tender on account of their presence. But this largeness of knowledge and feeling was not an adequate compensation for what she had lost of her human freedom and her human purity. That is why for ages she kept her ear to the ground, counting the footsteps of the unseen comer, the great Rama Chandra who would restore her to humanity. When this restoration did come, it was a richer and more complex experience than she was prepared for. She woke back to her old life, but it was not the life she had known before her transformation into stone; it was a unique combination of the old and the new, and the poet says:

"You have the wonder of new birth and the wonder of old time in your awakening."

#### IV

Urvashi is a much more fascinating and picturesque figure than Ahalya and has occurred more frequently in

literature and legend. It is said that once upon a time in the dim past the gods and the Titans churned the ocean with the help of the great serpent Vasuki and the *Mandar* hill in the hope of getting treasures hidden in the depths of water. Among the treasures thus achieved were Lakshmi, the Goddess of plenty who came out of the deep sea with a goblet full of holy nectar that was to bring immortality to the gods, and also Urvashi, fairest of women, who has ever since been looked up as the highest embodiment of the elusive, mysterious and irresistible fascination of beauty, especially of feminine beauty. After the first churning had been over and the gifts had been taken by the gods, a second attempt was made, but this time the serpent Vasuki was tired, and instead of treasures the irate ocean spouted forth deadly poison which might have burnt the universe into cinders. The Great God Shiva rescued the worlds, celestial and terrestrial, by drinking the poison which stuck in his throat, giving his neck a blue stain, and since then he has been called *Nilakantha* or the Blue-necked God. Indra made Urvashi, whose youth is eternal, a dancing girl in Paradise, and whenever any sage would practise austerities that might make him a rival of Indra, the King of Paradise sent Urvashi to seduce him and the sage would invariably yield to her charm, thus losing the fruit of ages of penance. Once Urvashi fell under a curse and had to pass a period of sojourn on the earth where she became the queen of King Pururava, but at the end of her term of exile, she fled to Paradise, leaving the disconsolate king to search for her in vain.

Although Urvashi has been celebrated in Indian religion, legend and literature, she is nowhere so great as in Rabindranath's magnificent poem about her. It has already been pointed out that from his earliest boyhood the poet was passionately fond of nature. Great as is his sensitiveness to the varied sights and sounds in nature, the more important thing is that he saw in these multifarious objects a unifying spirit whom he imagines in his own

distinctive way invoking her in one of his poems (*The Fugitive II*—1) is the Lady of Manifold Magnificence whose path is strewn with lights and whose many toned music is echoed from innumerable worlds through signs and colours. It is the same Lady who is found in the individual human soul where shedding all her variety she blossoms as a lonely lotus of love. The manner in which the scattered beauties of nature are represented as forming parts of the expression of the Lady of Manifold Magnificence is as remarkable as the way in which she is identified with the indwelling spirit of man.

— In another poem written several years after (*Lover's Gift*—54) Rabindranath imagines the beauty of the universe as divided into two separate forces—one represented by Urvashi and the other by Lakshmi the two fair women who rose in the beginning of time from the churning of God's dream. Urvashi stands for that aspect of beauty which is seen in the flowering frenzy of Nature and which in the shape of a woman haunts startles and waylays man. Lakshmi on the other hand is the spirit of plenty in Nature and of motherliness in humanity leading men not to the bower of passionate tryst but to the temple of the Unknown. Excellent as these two poems are they are incomplete symbols of the idea of beauty. The Lady of Manifold Magnificence is lost in the multitude of forms in which she displays herself she has no life of her own. The poem in *Lover's Gift* referred to above cannot give a complete portrait of Beauty because in it Beauty is seen not as a single figure and the force of the poem consists in the emphasis on the contrast between two aspects of beauty rather than in the delineation of its uniqueness and complexity.

From all these defects the great poem *Urvashi* (*The Fugitive I*—vi) is free. In loftiness of conception and in splendour of imagery it has few parallels in Rabindranath's work or outside it. In this poem there is an attempt at the portraiture of the pure gem like essence of beauty to



which the only noteworthy parallel is the painting of Mona Lisa (*La Gioconda*) by Leonardo Da Vinci. Although no praise is too high for the delicacy with which the eyelids or the hands are drawn by Leonardo Da Vinci, the most important thing in the celebrated portrait is the strange smile in the lips of Mona Lisa, which symbolizes the eternal mystery of beauty or, more correctly, feminine beauty, but as painting is a less spiritual and more sensuous form of art than poetry, a portrait in canvas cannot have the intricate and dynamic significance of a poem. In yet another respect Rabindranath had an advantage beyond the reach of Leonardo Da Vinci. Mona Lisa was a real woman with none of the complex associations that gather round a mythical figure; a real woman may appeal more intensely to the artist than will a legendary heroine, but her charm is more of the moment. The rocks and the traces of the sea suggest that the beautiful woman is only the highest point in a perpetual life which has been flowing through nature and humanity, that the mysterious smile has perfected itself through ages, through Leda and St. Anne and a hundred other famous women. But bereft of positive historical or legendary associations, such a suggestion is bound to be faint, and, if pressed too strongly, will appear to be fantastical.

In *Urvashi* Rabindranath takes as his theme a woman celebrated in the Vedas, in the Mahabharata and by Kalidasa; here is, indeed, a woman who is as old as the rocks and who is the mother of the line of kings and princes who are the protagonists in the Mahabharata; and yet age cannot wither her, for when Arjuna, the great grandson of King Pururava, went for a sojourn in Paradise, she tried to cast the spell of her fadeless beauty on him who was younger than her by aeons. Indeed, even the etymology of her name indicates that she is the enchantress who fascinates the great, not to speak of the small. Although Rabindranath accepts the main outlines of the traditional story which helps him to depict Urvashi as the

symbol of his own comprehensive vision of beauty, he makes one or two significant changes. He does not mention Urvashi's connection with Pururava, because that would give a local habitation to what is only an idea and a name. He omits, too, the episode with Arjuna, because that is the only occasion where she failed to evoke a response. He represents Urvashi as the bearer of the goblet of celestial nectar, leaving out Lakshmi altogether, but he also makes her the purveyor of poison, thus completing the picture of beauty which, in all places and ages, gives man his richest experience but has also its potentiality for destroying him. On the whole, the legendary story with the slight modifications referred to above helps the poet to make of Urvashi a marvellous creation of symbolist imagination; she is a beautiful woman who sprang out of the foam on a particular day and has been sending a thrill of rapture over the universe ever since, and yet in her unfading youthfulness and power of enchantment she is less an individual than the embodiment of the poet's idea of the principle of beauty. Nowhere else does an ancient myth pass so unobtrusively into a modern symbol.

Leonardo Da Vinci emphasized the matron in Mona Lisa; it seems, as Pater points out, that the experience of ages has passed into her features which have a touch of weariness and *ennui*, and the mysterious smile is not without a suggestion of the sinister. Rabindranath stresses the freshness of beauty, its inexhaustible charm and, in spite of its association with poison, its perpetual innocence. Urvashi carries death in her left hand and deathlessness in her right, because the opposition between mortality and immortality does not exist for a woman who came out of the sea in the full bloom of youth which she retains in unbedimmed splendour all through the ages. The sun remains hidden in the night, but it does not pass through any process of development from the dim beginnings to lusty youth; when it rises at dawn, it is already in the fullness of its glory; the veil is lifted and the sun is visible in

all its might Such is Urvashi who might have passed her infancy, if she had any infancy at all, in the coral bed of the ocean, but when she rose out of the waves, she was like the dawn, without shame and without veil But there the parallelism ends, \* for the dawn deepens into noon and noon fades into evening But not so Urvashi, because although a woman, she has only a woman's body and a woman's charm without a woman's history Neither mother, nor daughter is she nor bride, differing, in this respect, from Leda, Helen, St Anne and Mona Lisa She is the embodiment of pure beauty, dissociated from all conventional forms and associations The typical woman has something of Urvashi, but Urvashi has nothing of the typical woman neither a woman's duties and responsibilities nor a woman's inhibitions She has not the modesty or the sense of shame which is part of Eve's legacy, her unblemished radiance has no human counterpart, it is the fragrant whiteness of a jasmine that has not grown on any stem and has therefore, escaped the painful process of evolution

Although Urvashi rose out of the sea on the particular day when the ocean was churned, she is really as timeless as God Himself and is connected with the tumultuous dream which blossoms in that limitless mind Beauty sends a wave of ecstasy, but it also exercises a chastening influence on the rebellious forces of nature, when she first appeared the mighty sea greeted her, laying down its waves at her feet, and it is suggested that even the monster snake saluted her, spell bound But Urvashi was made a dancing-girl in heaven and as a dancing girl she has ever remained there Here once more the legendary woman sheds her limitations, becoming a cosmic symbol of the spirit of freedom and joy which sways the heavens the earth and the world of man Legends tell us that Urvashi dances before the gods that in all ages she has enchanted ascetics who have

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\* So far as the earth is concerned she has vanished and made her home on the Mount of Setting (Thompson's translation)

laid at her feet the fruit of their austerities, and it is a matter of history that innumerable poets have sung of her beauty and glory. One meaning of her name is that she manifests herself in the expansive universe of space, and this leads Rabindranath to imagine that she is the creative spirit of life which makes the earth shiver with flowers and fruits, gives light to the stars in the sky and causes the frenzy of desire in men's hearts. But she remains for ever a denizen of Paradise and her principal business is to entertain the gods with her dancing. She is much more solid than the mere fleeting glimpses of Beauty whom Shelley sought in this dim vast vale of tears, but it is true that there is something exotic about her. Urvashi came from the sea to the earth, but she has permanently established herself in the heavens. That is what makes earth's loveliness so tender; that is the reason why the winds of spring are laden with the pang of separation and the delicate charm of the moonlight is sad with the memory of a glory that has vanished. But Urvashi, the embodiment of Beauty, has not only ever-lasting youth but also boundless freedom, and man's hope is that one day she will return to the earth, and on that day the distinction between loveliness and squalor will disappear.\*

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\* In the poet's English version of the poem in the *Fugitive* the last portion is left out. Thompson gives a full translation in *Rabindra Nath Tagore. Poet and Dramatist* and also in *Poems*.

of love, how it comes into one's life as a strange thrill that haunts and startles and then sweeps away everything before it. The experience occurs very simply to a woman in the midst of her commonplace duties in drab surroundings but she feels a sudden ecstasy, which, although she only half understands it, completely overpowers her (*The Gardener*—20 21). The beauty of such poems consists in the unforced manner in which the call comes and just starts a delicate excitement in the woman who has seen the man but has no closer knowledge of him. She does not yearn for an intimate acquaintance, she only wants to give him a flower from her hair, because such a gift will be a fitting memorial to the tenuous emotion awakened by him. Or she is so much puzzled by the mysterious advent of the man that she does not know what to do. There are changes in the moods of Nature where clouds of July make room for the soft blue skies of autumn, which in turn, are succeeded by the restless days of spring, all these changes are reflected in the tunes woven by the wandering young man who disturbs the woman in her work. She does not know why he has come to her, but the strange persistence in his songs and visits exercises for her an inscrutable attraction that comes simply, almost accidentally, but also irresistibly. The chief excellence of Rabindranath's poems of love seems to be his ability to capture this delicate thrill which disturbs men and women in the midst of their daily occupations and gives them a taste of the ineffable.

In some poems such as *The Gardener*—18 and 19, Rabindranath speaks of an experience, which although commonplace has a rich poetical association, because it occurs frequently in Vaishnava poetry. Women in villages go out of their homes to fill their pitchers in ponds. It is, therefore, easy for the poet to imagine that it is on such occasions that the Indian woman, otherwise so much restricted by social conventions, meets the young man who enthralls her or whom she enthralls. In the poems under discussion Rabindranath portrays the yearning of lovers

with a marvellous economy of suggestion. There is no emphasis, no intricacy, it is just a passing excitement which stirs the heart and stops where it begins. Two sisters go to fill their pitchers, they come to a particular spot and then smile, because they know that there is somebody waiting behind the trees. This somebody is not a professed lover of either of the girls, indeed, that is probably the reason why the poet mentions two sisters instead of one, we are not told anything about the young man or of the nature of his relationship with the girls. But just because he is there, watching the girls, their pitchers, too, lurch suddenly and water spills as they reach this spot. It is through the description of this trivial occurrence that the poet suggests the nervous tremor of the young girls who do not even meet the young man. The beauty of such poetry is derived largely from understatement and from the artistic potentiality of apparently insignificant incidents. In the other poem, the young man does meet the woman with the pitcher, who casts a gleaming look at him from behind her veil. It is little more than a mere titillation, because the woman passes him by, but the man, who has received the magnetic glance, stops to decorate it with appropriate imagery culled from nature. It is like the breeze that sends a shiver through the rippling water and sweeps away to the shadowy shore. Or it is like a bird of the evening that hurriedly flies across the lampless room and disappears in the night. Both the images emphasize the notion of an exotic, fugitive thrill that awakens a response in the depths of the heart and is then heard of no more. The bird comes into the room from the outside and then swiftly vanishes in the night, it creates a flutter in the room which, being dark, does not afford a clear view of the stranger that comes and then goes away. The image of the breeze is more conventional, but the emphasis placed on its sweeping away to the shadowy shore adequately represents the mysterious spell cast by the woman with the pitcher on the speaker in this poem.

Radha goes out to bring water from a pond and is way-laid by the sweet music coming from Krishna's flute. In *Lover's Gift*—24 Rabindranath takes the help of an even more commonplace incident, making it the vehicle for expressing the mystical yearning which is a large element in human love. At noon the young bride waits anxiously for the bangle-seller who goes from house to house, selling his wares to village women. Nothing can be simpler or more trivial than this. But the bangle-seller, who arouses an irresistible longing in the young bride pining in an alien home, is an unknown man bringing strange wares, and by a daring flight of imagination the poet makes his coming the symbol of a great love which scatters everything else to the winds. He is the Stranger who may wean the girl bride from her hearth and home as Krishna eternally weans Radha from hers. The Stranger, says the poet, "will pass by your door with his clear cry, and you shall fling open your window, cast off your veil, come out of the dusk of your dreams and meet your destiny."

Different from the above poems and possibly more delicate than any of these is *The Gardener*—17 in which we hear of the tender attraction, not strong enough to be called love, existing between Ranjana of the village Khanjana and the speaker who dwells by the river Anjana. It is nowhere said that the man meets Ranjana. But there are a thousand things which connect them with each other: they live in the same village, and the same river murmurs its notes to both of them. Her pair of pet lambs come to graze in his field, for the distance between their homes is negligibly small, and flowers launched from their landing-stairs come floating by the stream in which he bathes. These happenings, although trivial, are charged with a delicate suggestiveness, because they make the speaker feel a strange nearness towards Ranjana. The other points of connection are even subtler and more ethereal. "When their linseed is ripe for harvest the hemp is in bloom in our field. . . . The rain that floods their tank makes glad our

*Adam forest'* It is this secret affinity between things in nature that strengthens the bond between the speaker and Ranjana, this bond is more rarefied and possibly deeper than the emotion to which convention gives the name of love

Yet another aspect of the sensation of novelty and strangeness associated with the feeling of love is expressed in *Lover's Gift*—60, in which the most impure of women suddenly awakens to the dawning of pure love in her heart. It is one of those prostitutes who were sent by a King's minister to tempt an ascetic. This ascetic, who had never seen a woman, was entranced by her beauty and hailed her as a goddess, a wonder of creation. This was a novel experience also for the prostitute who had defiled and been defiled by many men. Others had been charmed by her, but they had known her to be a creature of flesh, a lump of sin. But the ascetic's mind responded to beauty with an ardour that had no connection with carnal desires, the woman, too, realized that the sinful life she had led was only a screen behind which the divine innocence of a virgin had preserved itself beyond the reach of corruption. Some of the images very tellingly represent the uniqueness of the experience that came equally to the sophisticated woman and the unsophisticated child. At the first contact of feminine beauty the young ascetic had a feeling of wonder, and the sinful woman realized the difference between this response and the fleshly desire she had awakened in other admirers. That is why his wonder waiting eyes she likens to the morning stars which continue to shine even after the darkness of the night has gone and then vanish in the heat and glare of noontide. The words of praise he sang in honour of her beauty appeared to him to be as much untouched by human impurity as the silent hymn the hills raise to the dawn. To the innocent ascetic womanly beauty made an appeal that was less complex but more mysterious than the feeling he aroused in her, he said that her touch was of the Immortal and that her eyes had the mystery of the midnight



## II

Not only is love a strange, disturbing sensation but it is also an absorbing passion, and many of Rabindranath's poems reveal the depth and the agony and the fever and the fret of this emotion which is possibly the most fundamental thing in human life. The greatness and originality of these poems consist chiefly in the images by means of which the intensity of love is portrayed. In *Lover's Gift—3*, which may be read also as a *Jivan Devala* poem, the heart of the lover is likened to an orchard in which the ripe fruits jostle one another in an anguish of fulness, ready to hold their burden of sweetness to the lips of the sweetheart. The restlessness of the heart is represented by the tremulous leaves and the butterflies shaking their wings at the sun, the intensity of love is suggested by the clamorous fruits which crave for completion. In *Lover's Gift—4*, the exuberance of emotion is delineated with the help of different images. In his eager desire for union the lover naturally minimizes the distance between him and his sweetheart, saying that she is as near to him as the meadow flower is to the earth, an image which is as novel as it is suggestive. The comparison between the fulness of the heart and the fulness of a river in autumn is conventional, but the poet adds a touch of his own to this well worn image when he compares the songs of love to the music of a stream, which, unlike ordinary human music, is produced by all its currents and waves.

The most magnificent poem in which Rabindranath expresses the richness of love is *The Gardener—12*, which is redolent of Vaishnava associations and is yet one of his most characteristic and original works. In sustained energy of feeling and in the gradual development of the leading idea which reaches its climax in the last stanza, it is a notable product of his imagination. The heart of the lover is identified with the lake in which the ladylove is invited to fill her pitcher and the water will cling to her and

babble around her. At first sight the idea will seem to be only a daring conceit, but the poet's fervid imagination makes the fantastic image an appropriate vehicle for the expression of intense passion in which all other feelings are drowned. If she sits idle and listless, the grassy slope and the wild flower will make her heart wistful, and her thoughts will stray out of her dark eyes out of the same irresistible urge that makes a bird fly away from its nest. Her veil will drop to her feet, and she will cast off her blue mantle on the shore, hiding herself in the dark waters so that at the climax of her union with her lover, she will feel the all-devouring sensation of death.

Rabindranath often shows the intensity of love by depicting his heroine in one particular mood or her reactions to one particular situation. In *The Gardener*—9, he takes the very ancient theme of Sanskrit and Vaishnavi poetry—the ladylove going out to meet the lover under cover of darkness, but he reads into this theme a meaning of his own. The woman hopes that the gloom of the night will conceal her from view, but she is constantly betrayed by her own self. If she goes out it is her own anklets that grow loud and put her to shame. If she sits still, waiting for him, it is the wild beatings of her own heart that disturb the surrounding quietness. When the meeting does take place and she wants to hide her happiness in the darkness of the night it is the gleaming jewel at her breast that exposes her to view. The contrast between the sharp ray of the jewel and the deep darkness of the night in which even the stars have been veiled by clouds gives an idea of the intensity of her rapture and of her womanly delicacy which makes her afraid of being gazed at.

In *The Gardener*—8, the poet depicts in another situation the same combination of intensity and shyness in a woman's heart. The young traveller came to seek the woman who had been waiting for him with eager excitement, but for very shame she could not say that it was she whom he had come out to meet. The three stanzas of the

poem describe the three different occasions on which the expectant traveller came, and the maiden, for very shame, failed to respond. Much of the beauty of the poem consists in the way in which the poet creates the appropriate atmosphere by drawing pointed attention to suggestive details. In the morning she wore a fresh wreath on her loose hair and he had a pearl chain on his neck and the sun's rays fell on his crown. In the languid evening she was listlessly braiding her hair, and the young traveller came in a chariot in the glow of the setting sun. When he came in a night of April, she wore a dress that was full of voluptuous suggestiveness. Her bodice had the colour of the peacock's throat and her mantle was as green as young grass—images indicative of the exuberance of animal passion and of the vitality of nature.

In some poems along with the intensity of love there is a suggestion of its infinite mystery and inexplicability. In *The Gardener*—28, it is a man who is the speaker, by a series of contrasts he shows that even when the human heart has completely surrendered itself, it fails to explain all its significance. Flowers and gems are beautiful things, and they are solid, material bodies which can be grasped. Pleasure and pain are spiritual experiences but they are relatively simple and easily find adequate expression in smiles and tears. Love, however, is too deep for expression, and the ladylove who wants to know her sweetheart completely is like the moon trying to fathom the bottom of the sea. The same idea is expressed in a completely different manner in *Lover's Gift*—23. The lovers are on the two banks of the same river, which beautifully suggests separateness in union. The same river runs between them, singing the same song, but as they hear from opposite banks, there is a difference between the messages it conveys to them. "Only the words I heard from it you did not know, and the secret it spoke to you was a mystery for ever to me."

Rabindranath dwells not only on the intensity and mysteriousness of love but also on its expansiveness and

immensity It creates a small world of two persons with no room for a third, but there it is as infinite as the sky In *The Gardener*—32, a woman, who is amazed at the vastness of her own significance, asks her lover if it is, indeed, true that she carries in her limbs the memory of past joys, that she adds to the beauty of nights and mornings and that her lover travelled worlds and ages in order to meet her *The Fugitive*—II 11 depicts the same significance from a man's point of view and expresses it by means of a pointed contrast For the world at large he is a nameless person drifting in the common tide, and men hastily pass him by in the market But for her he is an emperor whom she makes great by means of her love It is her love which has given him a seat amongst the heroes of legend and poetry and he has acquired, too the largeness that belongs to the forces of nature If she gives him a kiss, it will be of no significance for other people, but he assures her that in their own world he carries it as the sun carries in its orb the fire of the divine touch and shines for ever, or as the sky carries in its immense expanse the light radiating from *Lakshmi*, the goddess of plenty

The greatness of love is seen in yet another way in those poems in which in the most rapturous moment love seems to reach forward to something beyond itself In *The Fugitive* —II 9, the lover rehearses, in his own way, the Hesper Phosphor image of *In Memoriam*, saying that the dark eyes of the ladylove will occur to his memory in some subsequent birth when he will meet her in different surroundings and that the beauty born of his own passion in this life shall pass into her face in the next In II 10, the lover asks his sweetheart to do away with words and music so that they may be locked in a silent passionate embrace, but this union which will make the most of the fleeting moment will also sweep away their thoughts to the shoreless delight that is realizable only in eternity In *The Fugitive*—II 18, the lover seems to feel in the depth of the night that his love can fulfil itself if only it can carry

to his ladylove a message from beyond life's borders. The dark night seems to be in tune with the spirit of this love which reaches forward to a higher region, for it seems to throb with thoughts that are awed at their own dumbness.

### III

Rabindranath not only portrays the depth, intensity and expansiveness of love but also analyses its more light-hearted phases. In *Lover's Gift—18*, the speaker puts forward a plea for love that commits slight indiscretions; for the law laid down in May is best broken in December. In another poem, *The Gardener—11*, the lover is in such a joyous mood that he will not allow his ladylove to linger over her toilet. If her braided hair has been loosened or if her toilet is not yet finished, it does not matter, for he is in a hurry to go out with her and incidentally reminds her that she need not touch her eyelids with lampblack because these are naturally darker than rain-clouds. The poet is in a still gayer mood in *The Gardener—40* in which the speaker tries to evoke a note of pathos because he is bidding farewell, but the sweetheart knows and so does the speaker himself that he will come back and that the leave-taking is only a pretence. But he pleads with her all the while to accept the illusion of farewell, for it will add zest to their love-making, and if she can shed tears, it will only deepen the dark rim of her eyes and thus add to her beauty. *The Fugitive—I. 10* is equally flippant in spirit. The lover does not even want to pry into the secrets of a woman's heart. It is enough if she can weave a web of delusion around him, if her beauty is of the figure and her smile merely of the face. He points to an appropriate image in nature in justification of his superficiality: the lily that dances on the rippling surface is beautiful on its own account and one need not care for what lies beneath.

In some other poems, the psychological interest is deeper and more complex. In *Lover's Gift—28*, the speaker

dreamt that her ladylove was by his side, tenderly ruffling his hair with the melody of her touch. So far there is nothing extraordinary, except perhaps the mixture of visual, aural and tactual imagery. But suddenly he has a peculiar wish, looking at the Milky Way, he is tempted to carry his association with his ladylove to the farthest point beyond the world of sensuous communion and wonders if when he was dreaming about her she had a dream that rhymed with his. Teachers of religion generally point to the transitoriness of life and ask us to mourn and to think of renunciation. But it is in this certainty of quick dissolution that one of Rabindranath's lovers finds a source of joy. This mood is different from the pessimism of hedonists who ask us to eat and drink in merriment today because tomorrow we die. It is a great comfort to this lover in Rabindranath's poetry to think that life is not an old burden and that man's path is not a long journey. The swift movement of life quickens our blood and brightens our eyes to snatch kisses that would vanish if we delayed. Indeed, one reason why beauty is pleasing to us is that it dances to the same fleeting tune with our lives. (*The Gardener*—68) Another lover finds in the fugitiveness of life a justification for his own changefulness. His ladylove is dead, and it is certainly heroic to be inconsolable in grief. But the passage of time and the quick changes in the seasons exercise an irresistible fascination for the lover who cannot continue mourning for one who has herself taken her heart away. (*The Gardener*—46) In *The Gardener*—38, the poet announces without regret or apology that his poetic ambition has been frustrated, because he was ensnared by the charms of his beloved, and no wonder that instead of writing a great epic he has only composed short lyrics in her honour. But he is unashamed because he sets less value on the poet's celebrity of ages than on the lover's immortality of a moment.

In some lyrics of love there is a dramatic interpenetration of motives. In *The Gardener*—36, we find that the

lover comes to the sweetheart and boldly courts her, kissing her and putting a flower on her hair. The girl is scandalized at this daring act and far from responding to these advances asks him to leave her. It appears that her heart is untouched by the young man's wooing but this is far from the truth. Beneath an exterior of sternness, she has a passionate heart which responds to the adventurer's actions and when he goes away, taking the garland from her neck she begins to pine for him saying, 'Why does he not come back?' The mixture of different emotions is even more intricate in *The Gardener—41*, in which the young man puts on an appearance of indifference, frivolity and callousness so that it seems that he is incapable of deep feeling. Nothing is indeed, further from the truth, he is really screening his emotion behind this mask, because he fears that if he speaks the truth he will not be able to evoke a response, and his feeling will be put to shame. Not only is this an unusual mood which reveals in a subtle manner, the deep love concealed behind surface carelessness but the theme has also been elaborated with the help of a number of suggestive details which show the dramatic interaction of conflicting motives.

Yet another example of the mixture of moods is seen in *The Gardener—33* in which the heroine alternately asks for pity, forgiveness and encouragement. In a very telling phrase she compares her falling in love to a bird losing its way, she realizes too, that by yielding to the call of love her heart has laid bare its secret. In this moment of absolute surrender, she wants the lover to cover her nakedness with pity. It is probable that the man to whom she has given her heart may not be able to respond to her advances. That will be for her a state of abject misery which she expresses by a slight variation on what she has said previously. It is not he who will now cover her nakedness with sympathy, but she will cover her forlornness with both her hands. In the next stanza, she changes into a mood of perilous abandonment in which she views with joy

the possibility of his loving her. Then she will sit on a throne and rule him like a goddess, but even then she realizes that her power will depend on him and her strength will be the strength of weakness. That is why in this mood, too, she asks him to bear with her pride and to forgive her her joy.

#### IV

The reader will note, in the analysis given above of Rabindranath's poems of love, an attempt to discover a relationship between natural forces and human love. The discovery of sympathy between man and nature or the expression of man's feelings with the help of images drawn from nature is as old as poetry itself and cannot be put forward as a feature of Rabindranath's work alone. What is distinctive about his poetry is the touch of intimacy or what he himself calls the interrelatedness between human emotions and natural forces. Seldom is nature a mere decorative background, it enters into human feelings or human feelings enter into nature. Even when nature seems to remain in the background, it is really a ministrant actively co-operating with man to heighten his passion. When at youth's coronation Kalidasa took his seat in his bridal chamber along with his bride, the earth spread its emerald green carpet beneath their feet and the sky its gold embroidered canopy over their heads, and the seasons danced round them so that love between man and woman might realize itself in its fulness. And when God's curse descends on the egotism of youth, not only is there separation in the human world but the season's festival is ended in a moment, too.

In *Lover's Gift*—14, the lover is impatient and asks forgiveness of his sweetheart. The season of summer and the rains has communicated its enchanting restlessness to the ladylove's beauty, the winds are rampant in her hair, the coming of the rains finds in her eyes its music, and it



is in decorating her hair that jasmines reach their fulfilment. The poet is in a still grayer mood in *Lover's Gift*—19 in which he twits the writers of scriptures who say that at fifty man should renounce the noisy world and retire into the forest for spiritual contemplation. Dissenting from this view, the poet holds that man should rather go to the forest when he is young, because it is then that his spirit is more attuned to nature, and it is young men and women alone who can take advantage of the hidden nooks which are waiting in the forest for the thrill of lovers' whispers.

It is to nature that the lover in *The Fugitive*—II 15 turns for appropriate symbols of the endless variety of love. For like the evening sky, love revels in an array of colours. Even when it puts on a robe of a particular colour, its shades vary, it has "now the green of the cool young grass and now that of the winter rice". Not only does love delight in a feast of colours but it looks beyond itself to something afar, and this aspect of it, too, finds an apt symbol in nature, the lover wants to bedeck his limbs in the blue of the oversea hills, because it is in this way that his love can best express its passion for the boundless.

The relationship between man and nature is most intimate in *The Gardener*—55 and *Lover's Gift*—15. In the former the lovers were separated and nature seemed to be charged with the agony of the disconsolate woman. With remarkable economy she desists from decorating her own feelings and just mentions that she had finished her work but had forgotten to braid her hair. She gives a minute picture of the natural environment at that particular hour and shows how the loneliness of the roads, the tireless cooing of the birds, the fitful gusts of the wind carrying a message from the distant fields and the heat of noon tide combined to make the spirit of the midday one with her own spirit.

The poet achieves identity between the beauty of nature and that of humanity in a different way in *Lover's Gift*—15, of which an expanded version is given in the *Collected Poems and Plays*. His ladylove is dark and her

eyes are like the eyes of a black gazelle The poet saw her first on a cloud laden day when the air boded storm and her veil trailed down at her feet A dark girl with braided hair loosened on her back she is almost a part of the cloudy evening and the identification between her and the surrounding aspects of nature is wrought through successive stages, reaching a climax in the last stanza but one in which she is hailed as the symbol of the mysterious beauty which is in nature and in the human heart

She is the surprise of cloud  
     in the burning heart of May  
 a tender shadow on the forest  
     in the stillness of sunset hour  
 a mystery of dumb delight  
     in the rain loud night of June

## V

In Bengali two of Rabindranath's most famous achievements are the poem on Shahjahan of which a truncated version appears in *Lover's Gift—1*, and the poem translated in *Lover's Gift—42* These poems have two things in common they relate to works of art and both of them are philosophical lyrics in which the poet considers the connection between love and life Emperor Shahjahan built the Taj as a memorial to his dead wife By a striking flight of fancy the poet imagines that the Emperor wanted to cheat Death which destroys and Time which effaces and that he must have realized that the best way to give permanence to love would be through the enchanting medium of art Time makes us forget but art give forms that last Death is formlessness itself but art fills the void by creating imperishable monuments Love thus finds a wonderful ally in art which enables it to triumph over death but this triumph is illusory for life goes on its ceaseless voyage and cannot therefore linger over what has

had its day, it has a call to meet the Endless and passes on leaving its burdens to be nursed by art

*Lover's Gift—42* was inspired it is said, by the portrait of Jyotirindranath's wife, but the poem seems to commemorate the poet's more intimate relationship with his wife. Whoever might the original of the poem be, the portrait which inspired it has not the artistic magnificence of the Taj, the poet, therefore, leaves art out of consideration and envisages the relation between love and life showing that death is not annihilation and that the forgetfulness of life is more apparent than real. From this point of view, this poem marks a departure from and an advance on what has been said in *Lover's Gift—1*. Life does indeed march on without caring to remember who is waylaid by death. As the poet beautifully puts it, "Life like a child, laughs, shaking its rattle of death, as it runs, it beckons me on, I follow the unseen, but you stand there where you stopped behind that dust and those stars, and you are a mere picture. But this cannot be the final truth about life which requires sustenance if it is to move on, defying decay. And this sustenance it gets from love, so even if the beloved is dead and apparently forgotten she survives in the poet's capacity to respond to beauty and to continue in the march of life. She has moved away from the poet's world only to take her seat more permanently at the root of his life. The poet therefore, ends on a note of optimism. You are no longer before my songs, but one with them. You came to me with the first ray of dawn. I lost you with the last gold of evening. Ever since I am always finding you through the dark. No you are no mere picture.

Adapting one of Burke's dicta to the present context, we may say that a good poem is one which combines a thought, a sentiment and an image, if this criterion be accepted, it may be reasonably claimed that these two poems are amongst the best that were ever written. The sentiments are those of love and sorrow at the death of the beloved.

two of the most universal themes in poetry. These sentiments supply the poet with food for his reflections on life and its relation to art and death. The sentiments and the thoughts which are indissolubly bound up with one another are expressed in vivid images which are not merely decorative but are organically connected with the content of the poems. The Taj represents Emperor Shajahan's wish to make imperishable a teardrop of love, the secret he whispered in the hush of night has in this way been wrought in the perpetual silence of stone. In the other poem the life blood of the dead sweetheart is imagined as communicating itself to the larger life of Nature, it is from there that the river derives its energy and the morning its cadence of colours. The simplest and yet one of the most striking combinations of sentiment, thought and image is seen in the poet's explanation of forgetfulness as remembrance lost in its own depths. It is from this subterranean storehouse that the dead friend's memories kindle the poet's sensibilities and illuminate the world for him.

## CHAPTER VI

### SONGS OF LIFE

#### I

Poetry—romantic poetry—has been defined as Adam's vision. It means that the poet recaptures for us the feeling of wonder with which Adam first looked at the universe around him. Such a view of poetry cannot explain the significance of the work of all poets. But it is particularly apposite to the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. He lived in the sophisticated world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but being sensuous to the tips of his fingers, he loved the things of the earth with the innocence of a child. What is most remarkable about him is that he viewed the simple, commonplace things of life with that artlessness and wonder which must have been the distinctive feature of Adam's vision of the world. Indeed, the most trivial and hackneyed experience of human life—the daily waking from sleep—is endowed with a new significance by him (*Poems*—92). Time passes on with tremendous swiftness, and in course of its flight, countless epochs have lost all their ladings and world-conquerors have vanished into the shadow of a name. Every man has a daily experience of nothingness in the darkness of night when he is locked in sleep which is very much like death. Is it not therefore a matter for endless wonder that man daily wakes from his sleep at night and receives the consecration of light in the morning when the world opens all its petals to him with their new, ever new appeal of beauty? This discovery of the eternal and infinite in the most commonplace things and experiences of life is the keynote of much of Rabindranath's poetry, it lies at the root of his recreations of ancient Indian beliefs as also of modern scientific facts. His imagination easily pierces behind appearances and reveals

the joy and wonder that accompanied "creation's everlasting first moment" (*Poems—119*)

It is in this spirit that Rabindranath views his own mission as a poet. The wonder and beauty of life and love is "muffled by the mist of our daily habits", and constant nearness makes us forget that she who is beside us is really far, far away. It is the duty of the poet to rend the screen of the familiar and arouse this sense of far offness which existed when lovers met for the first time. It must not be forgotten that there is an infinite distance between two persons living together, and this distance, which adds sweetness and beauty to life, is the theme of poetry and music (*The Fugitive—II 19*). Incidentally, we get in such reflections the key to Rabindranath's interpretation of Kalidasa's immortal poem *Meghadutam* in which the banished *Yaksha* sends the rain cloud as messenger to his ladylove who is pining for him in *Ujjain*. In Kalidasa's poem the *Yaksha* is expiating for a year some sin he committed in the past. But Rabindranath's interpretation is that the separation is less physical than mental, that we are all cut off not for a year but for all time from our friends and lovers who may be staying beside us, and that it is only through poetry and music that we can recapture and preserve this feeling of remoteness in nearness which is the secret of the wonder and beauty of love.

Poetry treasures all that is valuable in life, because it is the expression of personality, and personality is that side of a man's character in which he does not aspire after wealth or glory, the personal man, it cannot too often be repeated, is different from the professional man. Personality is expressed in those activities of man which are apparently fugitive and irrelevant, but it is these that form the stuff of poetry and art, kingly glory and wealth will not last, but a ladylove's last glance "flung through a passionate moment" will be preserved for ever (*The Fugitive—II 4*). Not only is the idea characteristic of Rabindranath but some of the images used in this poem are strikingly

original, because through them is discovered a deep human significance in the phenomena of nature. The evening may sweep away the ladylove's passionate look as it sweeps away the last flicker of fire from the sunset or this look may be washed off by rain as treasured pollen is from heart broken flowers. Nature's shifting beauties become in this manner the symbol of evanescence in human life. It is worthy of note, too, that the natural objects which are introduced as illustrative imagery become suggestive on their own account, but Rabindranath does not decorate them in the manner of epic poets. It is the deep half obscure and unsuspected human significance in these objects that explains the poetical appeal in them and gives largeness to the human emotion they are intended to illustrate.

In one or two poems Rabindranath makes an even more open avowal of his mission as a poet, which is to sing of things that are fugitive and apparently trivial. The poet does not linger to hoard beauties or to gather the dropped petals from flowers of overnight, he does not want to run after earthly treasures which constantly evade him who pursues them. Rather will he be content to leave the gaps in life as they are, to let unsolved mysteries alone. It will be enough if on a thriftless day of spring he can sing of the moment's meaningless rapture and dally with wayside beauties which laugh as they run (*Lover's Gift—6*). The excellence of such poetry consists not so much in striking images as in the novelty and boldness of the poet's attitude to life, in the manner in which he rejects conventional values and discovers the glory and the joyfulness of mere living of drifting in the current of the world.

Happiness on this view, is to be found not in laborious pursuit promising distant gain but in the trifles of the moment, in what the poet calls mere nothing in *Poems—45*. It is this attitude alone that can rightly attune us to the rains that sweep the sky from end to end without any hope of profit and to the wild wet jasmines that revel in their own perfume. The same idea is elaborated in *Lover's*

*Gift—59* in which the poet takes the reader to the Land of All I have Found. The Land Of All I Have Found is to Rabindranath what the Lake Isle of Innisfree is to W. B. Yeats, a refuge from the toil and turmoil of the work-a-day world. What is interesting about Rabindranath's conception is that this land is not far off from the familiar world of human activities. Rather is it to be found in the cool grass of common life where the poet finds rest from distant wanderings. Traders and soldiers may pass across this land but they do not stop here to collect profits or to enforce obedience.

It must be remembered, however, that just as freedom is realized in bondage so also heaven strives ever more to be born in the fruitful dust for its eternal hunger is for time and space (*Lover's Gift—49*). One of Rabindranath's shortest and best poems is *The Fugitive—III 2* in which he describes his daily meeting with mother earth—its waters and sands, its flowers in bloom and its whistling winds. These are all familiar and commonplace things but it is through them that the Eternal Stranger comes unobtrusively into the poet's heart. This communion with the Eternal Stranger is not a special privilege of the poet for common men, when they return home from their daily work, feel that he is with them unseen, and they repeat his name in their songs. Empires crumble into dust but the immanence of the Supreme Being in the common things of life has been felt in all ages in the simple hearts of people whose names are unrecorded (*III 4*). The suggestion of something entering a man's life from afar is made most beautifully in *Poems—92*. The beauty of this poem consists in its simplicity and naturalness. The poet meets an oldish upcountry man, trudging along the street. He and this stranger are unknown to each other, and the poet knows very well that he is a mere person to this man whose life is hedged round with his cow in his stall, his parrot in his cage, his wife, his neighbours and creditors, but somewhere in his consciousness the poet will occupy a little space in



the farthest limit of the unclaimed land of his life. It is such poems that show how the best romantic poetry need not abjure reality but may, indeed, spring out of an acknowledgment of the trivialities of daily life.

## II

The sense of largeness which inspires Rabindranath's poetry is chiefly derived from his faith in the vastness of nature. It is seen in his casual sayings recorded in *Stray Birds* no less than in his greater poems in which man's life is always viewed in relation to the vaster life of Nature. Two duellists in Japan fought for a whole day, and in the evening it was found that they were both dead. Rabindranath, who was asked to commemorate this incident in his poetry, wrote:

"They hated and killed and men praised them.

But God in shame hastens to hide its memory under  
the green grass."

The humanitarian sentiment is trite; what is distinctive is the way in which he imagines God as drawing a veil over man's vandalism by calling into being new vegetation; it is thus that life triumphs over death, all wounds are healed and rifts covered by the beauties of nature. Two lovers are separated and feel disconsolate. But nature supplies them with consoling parallels, for the stormy sea is lulled at last in its rocking cradle and the forest fire falls to sleep in its bed of ashes. Nature not merely supplies suggestive analogues but actively helps to obliterate all marks of scission in human life; lovers may part, but the cleavage will be hidden under living grass and flowers that laugh in the sun. (*The Fugitive*—I.14).

What applies to individual existence is more profoundly true of the larger life of man as a race. *The Fugitive*—II. 33 starts with a wail for the misery of man who has fiercely rent in pieces all that is good and great in life; the

future seems to be a heap of cinders, and the air is harsh with the cry, 'Victory to the Brute!' But man's hope is not dead so long as there are the vivifying beauties of nature which hold out the hope that the spirit of man will triumph over the forces of destruction. The reader of Hardy will be inclined to compare this poem with *The Darkling Thrush*. Hardy's poem is more condensed, less luxuriant than Rabindranath's, it is also more ironical, and less optimistic. The small bird has found an assurance of which Hardy is unaware, but the tiny flower among the thorns leads Rabindranath to exclaim, "The world's hope is not dead!" Nature also teaches the poet his own distinctive mission. When he saw the victory of the Brute and felt that the spiritual death of man was impending, his lute said to him, "Trample me in the dust." But when the poet is inspired with hope by the tiny flower among thorns and other signs of surging life, the same lute says to him "Lend me thy songs!"

The contrast between the narrow world of man and the ampler world of nature, between the home and the sky is suggested in *Poems—77*, in which, by means of a telling contrast, the poet grieves that although the joy of new life breaks out in the tints of flowers and the night beyond the wall has vanished, the smoking lamp with its paltry light and reeking smell is still burning in the cell. The immensity of nature is due not merely to its expansiveness and creative vitality but also to its continuity, to the power by means of which it can communicate its energy to the future. In a moving poem (*Poems—37*) Rabindranath apostrophizes the *Evening Past* which leads back to life unremembered designs for the shaping of new images, it is the Past that has flung up the Present from the womb of its own dumb night. In another striking poem (*Lover's Gift—12*) he dwells on the glory of Spring and traces the source of Nature's greatness to its power of grafting the beauty of the past on the present. On a particular day in the dim past, Spring first dawned on the world and men came out

of their homes, laughing and dancing in a sudden frenzy of mirth, and year after year since then Spring has come and enriched itself with the wealth of the human passion it has aroused. Men are mortal, and one generation vanishes, making room for another, but the dead have left the imprint of their passion on Spring which has thus grown in strength and power from age to age, for its breeze is laden with love-legends that have faded from all human language. In the same way, as spring comes to the poet year after year, it renews the tender timidity of the inexperienced joy with which he greeted its first advent in his life, and it carries all that was unutterable in him.

It is in this larger, unpurged life of Nature that the poet wants to merge himself. In his attitude to nature Rabindranath differs from other romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats who worship the spirit of Nature by freeing it from dross. It is in this purified spirit of Nature that Wordsworth finds the lesson of Duty, Shelley a message of Love and Keats that Beauty which is not born for death and is identical with Truth; if there is any impurity mixed with nature, the romantic poet would ask man simply to ignore it. But not so Rabindranath; he woos Nature as a whole and its appeal for him is derived as much from its purer beauties as from the odds and ends that are mixed up with them. One of his most magnificent poems is that in which he celebrates the river *Kopai* which has not the lofty associations of either the Ganges or the Padma. It is a slender stream which has not the glory of ancient lineage; but its destitution does not put it to shame. Its chief virtue is its intimate connection with human life; it times itself to the insignificant market cart lazily lumbering with a load of straw and to the village school master worth three rupees a month wearily trudging along with a torn umbrella in his head. (*Poems—94*).

In some poems in *The Fugitive*, Rabindranath wants to recapture the thrill of life that stirred the bosom of Nature in the dim past and has been stirring it ever since.

Here Nature is not personified as a symbol of any particular quality, indeed it has nothing human personal or spiritual, but it is out of this primal store house of life that humanity has evolved itself. The poet wants to go back to this pre human cosmic existence to which he had belonged ages before he was born. It is because of this embryonic connection that he feels joy in the beauty of nature and also a touch of sadness at the thought that his human birth has cut him off from this universal life (III 7). The call from the vaster world of nature comes to men in the midst of their daily work as something odd and strange and it comes generally to those who are a little out of the way. The clouds thicken in the morning after a rainy night and there is every sign that the day will be foul. A little eccentric girl whom her mother regards as incorrigible and her father as mad stands still at the window looking at the sky. Her mother and her brother went to call her off from there, but she remains unmoved with her gaze fixed at the thickening clouds. The ancient cry of Nature its dumb call to unborn life has come to this girl through the voice of the winds and the clouds and the rains she seems to have mentally removed herself from her narrow surroundings and lost herself in her communion with the eternal voice of Nature (III 9). The poet listens to this primeval voice of Nature when he looks at insects birds and animals who speak the language with which mother Earth responded to the first living clutch near her breast (III 10). It is in this recreation of the primeval spirit of life which is larger but less subtle than human life that we have the most original note of Rabindranath's poetry of nature and here there is also a wonderful combination of romantic fancy and evolutionary biology.

There is yet another group of poems in which scientific knowledge has been illuminated by romantic fancy. Modern science has given us an idea of the immensity of the universe that surrounds us in time and space but it has also shown that the universe to all appearances is inert

matter controlled partly by inexorable mechanical laws and partly by accidents which are incalculable but unescapable. This pessimistic conclusion of modern science has been absorbed into a romantic poet's imagination and expressed in a number of striking poems. A boy who had lost his mother was told that she had gone to heaven. But nobody knows where heaven is, and when at night the boy looked at the sky, seeking an answer to his puzzled query, no reply came, and the stars only seemed to be the burning tears of the ignorant darkness enveloping the universe. (*The Fugitive—II.21*). A dog used to play daily with a pet deer, but once on a spring day the deer went away, nobody knew where. The bewildered dog began to whine disconsolately, and his eyes seemed to say, "I do not understand." But the dog's difficulty is the difficulty of the universe, for it, too, does not understand the mystery of its own existence. It is, indeed, an extraordinary flight of the imagination by means of which a petty dog's unspoken question is made the symbol of the world's problem. (*III. 20*). In yet another poem (*III.13*) the poet employs the same technique to bring out the tremendous ignorance from which the whole universe suffers. On a star-lit night a young girl was going along a dark spiral staircase with a small lamp which suddenly goes out, and the girl begins to weep, saying, "Father, I have lost myself." The girl's cry is both comic and pathetic. Her dependence on the small lamp shows how ignorant she is; she does not know that she is there on the staircase as before and that the only purpose served by the lamp was to show her the way. It is easy to smile at the girl's ignorance and lack of self-confidence, but is the universe in a better position than this little girl or the small boy and the petty dog mentioned above? Are not the stars, vast as they are, only tiny lamps that illuminate the path of the universe, and if the stars go out, will not the universe feel as helpless as the little girl and cry out like her, "Father, I have lost myself"? It is difficult to find examples in which scientific speculation has been more effec-

tively transformed by imagination, and no poet has given a more graphic and more human picture of the weakness that is at the centre of the universe. The insignificance of the dog, the boy and the girl is the measure of the helplessness from which the universe suffers and of its absolute inability to comprehend the riddle of its own existence.

### III

As a poet Rabindranath tries to discover the potentialities hidden in the little things of daily life, but he shows that it is by escaping from calculations of profit and loss that such potentialities may be realized. It is not strange that he should seek in the child, as he has sought in nature, the symbol of the infinite with which he longs to be united. The child lives and plays in the common dust, but he makes and breaks his dolls with supreme unconcern. That is why his prototype is *Shiva*, the ever forgetful Lord of the universe, whose creations find their freedom by being taken from desolation to desolation (*Poems-63*). Adult man, whose life is an endless round of buying and selling, can realize the infinite if forgetting his cares and ambitions he can waft himself to the heaven of eternal childhood. It is interesting to note that such transformation can take place only through the agency of Nature, for Nature, like the child, is untouched by the corrupting influence of man's commercialism, the rediscovery of childhood is like the emergence of morning light out of mist (*Lover's Gift 48*). In the *Fugitive—I 21* the poet dwells through an elaborate contrast, on what the child means for the universe. Mind makes great preparations in its gross, vulgar manner, it is erecting a palace which stands for earthly grandeur and greatness, because it can take note only of such things as are "hugely" before us. But soon it is pointed out that it is this palace that is obstructing the advent of the new age, it stands in the way of the Great Coming. The palace is laid low, all its glory lies in the dust, it has been broken by

the onrush of New Life. But in what form does this New Life come and with what paraphernalia? There is only a child running from its mother's arms into the open light while the morning star shines overhead and the lily washed in dew glistens in the grass; the whole earth and infinite space are for the child who will rejuvenate the world. It must be admitted that this poem is openly didactic and that the allegory of the palace is extremely broad, but the picture of New Life, which comes without banners and pageantry, accompanied only by the morning star and the white lily, is undeniably suggestive.

In a few magnificent poems in *The Crescent Moon*, Rabindranath tries to depict the mystery and wonder in the advent of the child. The child asks the mother where he came from. This is an enigma which is as old as human history and will possibly remain for ever unsolved. Rabindranath tries to probe the mystery not in the manner of a scientist but by projecting himself into the mind of the mother out of whose womb the child leaps into life. The poem (*The Beginning*) is remarkable as much for original poetical fancy as for command of feminine psychology. It is common knowledge that man's advent on earth has been preceded by evolution extending over ages and that before the child's birth the mother passes through a period of gestation covering about three hundred days. Rabindranath transfers this probation from the physical plane to the region of desires, prayers and dreams. The baby lay hidden in the earliest desires of the mother, he was to be found in her childish plays and in the prayers she offered to the family deity; even the softness of his features was prefigured in the tender beauty of her youthful limbs. Not only does the poet add to the mystery of creation by transferring the focus of interest from the physical region to the psychological, but by another magnificent flight of fancy he makes the child the symbol of something afar which has come to her in a mysterious way from above. The child is so great for her that she can never think that she was his creator;

he is of the universe, he is twin born with heaven's morning light, but he is inalienably hers, too. This, indeed is to her the mystery in the birth of a child. How could he who is of the universe, who has floated down the stream of the world's life, be ensnared in her slender arms?

*On The Seashore* does not probe the secret of creation; it reveals the significance of childhood by means of an image that is suggestive of the vastness of life. The principal characteristic of childhood is supreme unconcern towards life's problems and struggles, while men toss on the rough waves and try to make headway, children play on the seashore, weaving toy boats with withered leaves, gathering pebbles and empty shells. Not only do they play on the shore of the sea of life, but the sea plays with them, too. "Death dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children, even like a mother while rocking her baby's cradle." The beauty of this poem is derived no less from the magnificent conception of life as an infinite sea on the shore of which childhood plays eternally than from the sharp contrast between what this sea is for children and what it is for men and women.

Children are different from men, they do not care for profit and loss, they do not understand the wiles of the world and are naturally credulous. As they are yet unacquainted with life, they have a feeling of wonder and mystery about it, that is why children's lullabies are full of fairy lore which appeals to their ingrained sense of wonder and also satisfies their curiosity which is not very fastidious about proof. In the evening when mothers are free to fondle children and anxious to lull them to sleep the moon which is so enchanting and which seems to be at the same time near and distant is the thing that most easily and irresistibly attracts children's attention. It is little wonder, therefore, that much of the fairy lore intended for babies is woven round the crescent moon. Rabindranath, however, looks at children's lullabies from a more comprehensive point of view. The world is certainly a source of



wonder and mystery for children; but equally certainly are children a source of wonder and mystery for us, especially for their mothers. That is why in children's lullabies the poet finds an expression of the attitude of the mothers, of the magic and beauty which grown-up people find in babies. The sleep that flits on baby's eyes and the smile that flickers on baby's lips have their source in a fairy land which is the home of the crescent moon. When it lived there, it had no end of freedom and no lack of wealth; but it has come like a mendicant to earth in order to conquer the endless love and pity and joy that lay hidden in the mother's breast. The reason why the child's beauty is entrancing is that the fairy mistress of dreams creates it and that this beauty is associated with the wind and the sun and the sky. The child has come to the earth from fairy regions, and if a naughty witch has stolen her sleep, she has to be traced to the drowsy shade of the *bakula* grove, where pigeons coo in their corner and fairies' anklets tinkle in the stillness of starry nights.

## IV

In the poems considered so far the poet reveals the psychology of men and women rather than of children. In the other poems in *The Crescent Moon*, he enters a child's mind and unfolds its intricate workings. The child is simple, unconventional, original and thus forms strange connections and associations. It is not merely sympathy but a rare capacity for projecting himself into the minds of children that distinguishes these poems of Rabindranath. Children are unacquainted with facts and they feel an intimate kinship with nature, which wears off as the shades of the world's prison-house close in upon them. Of all the things in nature they have the greatest fondness for the moon round which all their fairy stories have gathered from time immemorial; in life they love nothing so much as their mother, and by a parity of reasoning, the child—

"astronomer" thinks that what is true of one of these dear things must be true of the other. That is why he thinks of catching the moon just as he might catch hold of his mother's face. In another poem—*Clouds and Waves*—there is an interaction between the feelings of nearness and distance between humanity and nature. The child feels an attraction to merge himself in the life of the clouds and the waves, but he cannot, because the clouds and the waves are so far off, and he, too, is not willing to leave his mother. But he does not mind this limitation, for he will be the cloud and his mother the moon or he will be the waves and his mother a strange shore. A similar note is struck in *The Champa Flower* in which the child, after various unsuccessful efforts at concealing himself, wishes to become a *Champa* flower so that he may elude his mother and then return to her as her child. The child has not learnt to distinguish between man and nature, and his plans are not subject to the limitations of probability. In some other poems Rabindranath dwells on a characteristic of children which appeals to his imagination with peculiar force and is the theme of one of his best dramas. It is the child's craving for freedom, his desire to meet the Far-off. With his feeling of affinity with Nature he thinks that clouds are only paper boats flown by some playmate of his in the sky, but he launches his own paper boats with his name written in large letters on them in the hope that some one in some strange land will find them and know who he is. It is little wonder that a child longs most of all to be a sailor or a merchant so that he can go to the further bank of the river and visit unknown lands. It is in this way that the dull and laborious occupation of the boatman is endowed with a romantic charm, it symbolizes the escape from the cramping limitations of routinized existence. In one of the greatest of these poems—*Vocation*—many of the prosaic callings of life are in a similar manner shown to be full of fascination. The child who creeps like a snail unwillingly to school and is controlled by the mother at home thinks

that the bangle-seller, the gardener and the watchman have not to follow his routine, and he envies their lot in utter ignorance of their misery, boredom and poverty. This is a recurrent theme in Rabindranath's poetry, it is found, too, in *The Post Office* in which Amal finds a magic in the lives of the Dairyman, the Watchman and the Postman. The appeal of such poetry is twofold, it shows the child's mind, its simplicity and its longing for freedom, but it reveals, too, the hidden source of beauty in the hackneyed, prosaic occupations of society.

In the other poems in *The Crescent Moon* the psychological interest is more miscellaneous. The child is full of sympathy for little beasts and birds, because he has not been able yet to grasp the difference between himself and the world outside. He easily identifies himself with the parrot chained in the cage and the naughty little puppy that wants to eat from his mother's dish. He thinks, too, that his father's writing on paper is as good or as bad as his own scribbling, he is at a loss to understand why his mother chastises him for spoiling a single sheet of paper with which he has made a boat while his father seems to him to be wasting heaps of paper without her saying anything at all. As the child begins to grow in years, he acquires a sudden sense of self importance and wants to prove his superiority, but there is a touch of irony mixed with fantasy in his assumptions and proofs, the more he wants to show his superiority to his younger brother or sister, the more is it seen how much of a child he is. When he tries to teach his younger sister a, b, c, she tears the leaves and when he holds classes with the washerman's donkey, she does not realize that he is now a dignified schoolmaster and must not be addressed familiarly as brother.

The child is gifted with imagination, he not only swallows stories but can also create them because he has an artist's capacity for placing himself in imaginary situations. He knows very well how he will behave when he will be as big as his father, naturally he lays emphasis on the

most trivial aspects of his father's activities such as opening drawers to bring out money, going out without an escort and purchasing clothes, but the child invents his story with so much power that although we laugh at it, we are amazed at the minuteness of his observation as also at the confidence with which he projects himself into his father's place. This capacity for weaving fantastic yarns is exhibited with the most sustained energy in *The Hero* in which the child narrates, in elaborate detail, an imaginary exploit in which he is supposed to have rescued his mother from an army of bandits whom he fights single-handed. The boy realizes that his exploit is only a hypothesis but wistfully hopes that such a thing might come true one day. Then life would be like a story-book and even his sceptical brother would be forced to say, "Is it possible? I always thought he was so delicate!"

## V

"Tagore was the greatest humanist in India", says Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India*. It is only natural that the poet who maintains a humanist's attitude even in his musings on Nature and on God, should write poems that are directly concerned with human problems and human suffering and heroism. For convenience of discussion such poems may be viewed under three different heads: (1) patriotic poems, (2) stories dealing with Indian legends and (3) poems about founders of religion: Buddha and Jesus Christ.

Taking the first group first, we may say that although Rabindranath was no politician, he took a leading part in the *Swadeshi* agitation for which he wrote a number of songs, and although in subsequent years he kept aloof from active politics he wrote many national poems, sometimes for specific occasions and sometimes out of mere poetic urge. Some of these poems have a topical interest and have more patriotic fervour than permanent poetical merit. Some others which are great as poetry are distinguished by an

original outlook on life. "Nationalism", to quote Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru again, "is a narrowing creed, and nationalism in conflict with a dominating imperialism produces all manner of frustrations and complexes. It was Tagore's immense service to India. . . . that he forced the people in some measure out of their narrow grooves and made them think of broader issues affecting humanity". Even in these poems which may be said to be nationalistic in the narrow sense, Rabindranath brings largeness by portraying the national struggle as a pilgrimage, which requires from the pilgrim supreme courage and makes him march on heroically with absolute unconcern for what others might be doing or what risks he himself may be running. If Rabindranath has laid emphasis on anything, it is the substitution of fearless self-reliance for mendicancy. Not for the pilgrim is the music of the home, the light of the evening lamp, the wistful gaze of the sweetheart keeping watch. The Cruel One has come and the pilgrim must not turn away from the terror of Truth, nor be afraid of the phantom of the unreal. (*Poems—58*). It is in this broadening of the patriot's vision of life that the artistic quality of such poems consists; the patriot's march is looked upon, too, as a part of the march of man who is a wrecker of patterns, coming from all ages, crossing hills, breaking stone walls, bursting iron gates while the sky throbs with the drum—beats of eternity. (*Poems—101*). The march of humanity has here been caught up in the movement of the verse and its cadence is felt even in a prose translation. God's call has sped over all countries of the world, and India should take her place with other nations; she should not rot in isolation, neither should she think that she will plough a lonely furrow (*Poems—59*). "She should fight for the Kingdom which is in the union of hearts and for the Freedom which is of the soul" (*Poems—61*).

It is because Rabindranath looks at the Indian national struggle for freedom as a part of the march of humanity that his best poems on patriotism are free from the paro-

chialism that is generally found in works of this class His poems are both national and international, they give us the soul of a particular age and are yet for all times Mention should specially be made of *Gitanjali*—35 in which the poet draws a picture of the haven of freedom to which his country should awake It is interesting to note the process by means of which this truly Indian poem attains universality of significance For Rabindranath freedom is not an abstraction that is empty of content, neither is it a mere negative concept of rebellion against foreign oppression Moreover, the poet's description of the haven of freedom is as remarkable for fulness as for restraint and quiet dignity He pleads not so much for political liberty as for the ideals such liberty should aim at—freedom in the pursuit of knowledge intellectual fearlessness ceaseless striving for perfection and the emancipation of reason from the bondage of dead habit The poet thus raises the problem of the achievement of freedom from the political level to the spiritual and his portraiture displays both profundity and breadth of outlook

The poems of the second group of which the themes are all taken from stories in Indian legend and history are remarkable for vigour and concentrated energy of narration Unnecessary details are eschewed and in all these poems the poet emphasizes the superiority of spiritual to material wealth and of truth to mere form The effect is heightened by occasional uses of appropriate images that relate human drama to the workings of nature When on a night in August Upagupta the disciple of Buddha first met the dancing girl who was bedecked with jewels and drunk with the wine of her youth she invited him to her house but the young ascetic answered Woman, go on your way when the time is ripe, I will come to you These words though simple, were charged with a sombre significance which was reflected in nature before it is revealed in the girl's life At the moment when Upagupta uttered these words the black night grinned in a flash of lightning and the storm groined from the corner of the sky There was

thus a lurid contrast between the grimness of nature and the gaiety of the woman. The contrast is repeated, although in a different way, a few months later when on a spring night branches of trees ached with blossom and love-sick *Koels* sang rapturously from mango branches, 'but the dancing girl lay down in the dust, struck by the 'dark pestilence (*Fruit-Gathering—37*)'. In the story of *Shrimati*, the references to nature, although much less copious, are even more delicately suggestive. *Shrimati* lighted the lamps in Buddha's shrine in Ajatsatru's palace and paid for it with her life. The steady light of the small lamps gains in majesty when contrasted with the throbbing glow of the stars and the circumambient darkness of the evening (*Fruit-Gathering—43*).

In the third group of poems, Rabindranath lays emphasis on the message of Buddha and Christ, but these poems have more human than theological interest: they show how men to day have proved false to the deeper import of the religions they profess. In a poem—not translated into English so far—in *Navajatak*, the poet dwells on the mockery in the religious devotion of a Japanese Buddhist who, before going to hurl death-dealing missiles at the Chinese, says his prayer in the temple of the Lord who preached the message of non-violence. The poet is full of indignation also against the sanctimonious hypocrites who perpetrated the Munich Pact in the hope that peace would be brought down to this demented earth by the mere volume of their wailing uttered in a sacred text (*Poems—110*). In the *Son of Man* and *Borobudur* (*Collected Poems and Plays*) and some other poems, he refers to the contradiction between the message of love preached by Buddha and Jesus and the modern Buddhist's and Christian's practice of violence and rapacity. It must be admitted that many of these utterances are too topical and too openly propagandist to rank as enduring poetry, but in some of them such as *This Evil Day*, the note of genuine poetry is heard. The beauty of this poem which was written in indignant protest

against the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi is derived largely from the way in which the poet, in the heat of his anger, questions the value of the philosophy of forgiveness and asks if God has been able to pardon the men who are poisoning His air and blotting out His light. Evil is so rampant in the world that the creed of non violence and forgiveness preached by God's messengers seems for the moment to be unacceptable to God Himself.

Another remarkable poem is *The Child* or *He is Eternal, He is Newly Born* (*The Golden Boat*) in which the poet re-creates in his own way the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. *The Times Literary Supplement* praised *The Child* for its quiet and beautiful simplicity, but much more remarkable than its simplicity is the originality with which this ancient story is re-told for the modern world. The woman in the hut sitting on the grass with the new born baby in her arms looking like the morning star in the lap of dawn, the journey of men and women anxious to find fulfilment, the wise old man from the East who has seen the vision—these are all taken from the ancient tale, but they appear in a new setting and help to bring out the eternal significance of the birth of the Son of Man. The poet's re-creative faculty is best seen in the picture of the leader of the pilgrims whom the followers do not understand and yet follow instinctively. When in the midst of the journey they do not find the fulfilment they wanted, they kill him and are then held prisoners by their own crime and fear. This seems to refer to the story of John the Baptist who



contrast between the murky night and the brilliant dawn, between the broken turrets or the snake-infested shrines and the beautiful village with its fountains and palm-groves, between the meanings which are put into the word fulfilment by the devotee and the wise old man from the East on the one hand and the hungry voyagers who are out to seek mines of gold and books of wizardry on the other

## CHAPTER VII

### IN TUNE WITH THE INFINITE

*Gitanjali—Fruit Gathering—Crossing*

#### I

*Gitanjali* or *Song-offerings* is the most famous of Rabindranath's English works, it is probably his best. A book of poems remarkable for its quietness of spirit, it yet created a sensation amongst the English and European reading public when it was first published in 1912-1913. These prose poems are on the very ancient themes of man's worship of God, the ideas are simple and the images are familiar, almost to the point of being trite, but they are full of surprise at every turn of thought and phrase, and although the wave of enthusiasm that greeted the book on its first appearance has now subsided, the impression of uniqueness remains as fresh as ever. It is necessary to analyse the elements that contribute to the enchanting quality that readers find in these poems.

First in order of enumeration is the architectonic skill by means of which the poems are arranged so that one idea may gently glide off into another and there may be an impression of variety in unity. The impression of unity is never mechanical or rigid, a group of poems leads naturally on to its successor and even within a single group, every poem has its individual charm apart from its significance in the context in which it appears. A detailed outline of the structural scheme will give an idea of the complex harmony produced by the poems taken as a whole. In the first seven poems, the poet deals with the relationship between God and himself—the central theme of the book—laying emphasis on the immensity of God's gifts and the intimate relationship of love existing between Him and

the poet. In the next group (8-13), the same idea is carried forward and the stress is laid here on the proper realization of God. He is to be met in the common dust of life, where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and the path-maker is breaking stones. The poet is naturally eager to unite himself to God, and poems 14-36 deal with his eager waiting and the obstacles that handicap him. The state of separation is a darkness, but it is in darkness that God comes like a lover to woo the poet's soul which is like a bride. As soon as the meeting takes place, the gloom is gone, all bonds snap, and there is perfect freedom not only for himself but also for his country, and the poet draws a comprehensive picture of this freedom in poem no. 35 (*Where knowledge is free*).

Poem no. 37 marks a new beginning and may be compared with the initial poem, because it shows once again the endlessness of God's will as it expresses itself through man. When the poet is tired and his heart is hard and parched, God comes with a shower of mercy that gives strength and joy. In this group (37-57), the union with God has become a reality and many new aspects of their relationship are revealed. The important thing in this meeting of God and man is God's infinite love which brings freedom and joy. The dominant note in the poems in the succeeding group (58-70) is, therefore, a note of joyousness: a flood of joy has overspread the world and the poet is getting a full share of it. The union of God and man is now looked at from a new angle of vision: Does man alone feel this ecstasy? Does not God who is *Jivan-Devata* get His share of this joy? Is it beyond Him to be glad with the gladness of the rhythm of life?

If God is only a partner of man's joys, it is clear that man and God are not absolutely identical, that there is separateness as well as union, and this separateness is what the Vedantist calls *maya* or illusion. But even illusion is true as illusion, and it is in and through the bondage of separateness that man must achieve his unity with God.

Only man must dedicate himself completely to the service and love of God, and it is then indeed, that he will realize that unbroken perfection is over all (71-78). But the sense of separateness is also the cause of sorrow which is a part of man's heritage and the most poignant truth in his life. The separation will be ended only when man will leave the fruits of his life behind him and pass, through the gateway of death, to the infinite mansion of the Lord. The principal theme of the last group of poems is most appropriately death which breaks all barriers and enables the soul to return to its master very much as a flock of homesick cranes fly back to their mountain nests.

In course of his introduction to *Gitanjali*, W. B. Yeats refers to the extraordinary simplicity which is a large part of the charm of these poems. But the simplicity, though spontaneous, is the final result of many complex notes which co-operate to produce a single strain. As the poet says in his inimitable manner, that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune'. This achievement of simplicity through a maze network of thoughts, sentiments and images may be appreciated if only we consider his poems on any one theme, say, death which figures so prominently in the last group mentioned above. A full examination of these poems, even a detailed analysis of any one poem will take up too much space but some idea of the variety and richness of the poems may be formed if only the outline of the poet's musings on this one subject of death is traced. Life is imagined as a journey along a river at the call of the Boatman who beckons from the other shore. The poet reinforces this idea by saying that although people may smell flowers or critics may interpret poetry, the final purpose of all things—poems as well as flowers—is to point to God whom man meets in death. The full realization of life will therefore, come through death, and until this consummation is reached the pang of separation will continue to overspread the sky. Life is like a vagrant cloud that wanders uselessly to vanish into the gloom of night or

in the glare of day. It is possible, however, that death itself is not more serious than life, and it may be that it is only a useless inconsequence towards which life is progressing. In some poems Rabindranath adopts a more serious attitude. The approach of death makes him feel the richness of life and he hopes that since he has loved life so much he will be able to love death as well. Although he has wasted much of his life, the poet has no regret because he knows that time is endless in God's hands and it will never be too late to enter His mansion. This faith in God's greatness enables the poet to rise superior to personal sorrow, because he knows that although his own finite world could not hold his beloved there will be room enough in God's infinitely large mansion in which life is eternal and from which nothing can vanish. It is in this way that what is personal becomes transferred into the universal and sorrow becomes peace. Towards the closing songs of the book, the poet addresses Death more directly than ever before, he is God's messenger who will enable him to dive down into the depth of the ocean of forms and gain the perfect pearl of the formless. Death is the last sensation in which meet all the ecstasies and experiences of life, the poet will greet the Lord in death gathering together the diverse strains of his song into one last salutation.

Yet another aspect of the intricate artistry of the book appears in the variety of images by means of which the final surrender of life and the union with God in death are envisaged in these poems. He is the bridegroom and after the wedding the bride shall leave her house and meet her lord alone in the night. The earth and the poet were neighbours for long and his life was like a house. At the end of his days the poet will give back the keys of the door and leave for the unknown world beyond. But he expects that this unknown world will be as pleasant as the one he has known, it will be like a sucking child's leaving the right breast of its mother to find a welcome substitute in the left. Or life may be compared to a playhouse of infinite

forms and the end of it only means that the playtime is over. Death, however, is not equivalent to annihilation, rather will it lead to the resurgence of life in a more vigorous form. When all earthly things have vanished, the empty heart will sob out in music like a hollow reed. Death may also be likened to the change of a boat's helmsman, when the poet gives up the helm, God will take it up. But the image of the boat and the helmsman suggests going from harbour to harbour, which does not appropriately describe the restfulness of death. Rather may death be regarded as diving down into the depth of the ocean or as laying down the harp before the master when the music is over. Life is also compared to a long journey which takes man through a country of pleasure and pain to a palace which, to all intents and purposes, is beyond them.

## II

It is well known that when *Gitanjali* first appeared in England, Western readers received it with a shock of delighted surprise. They found here a series of lyrics which, although full of originality and richness were extraordinarily simple, which belonged to one particular country and were yet of the whole world. Critics began eagerly to analyse the source of beauty and wonder in these poems which seemed to contain qualities that do not often go together. W. B. Yeats and Ernest Rhys trace the uniqueness of these poems partly to the peculiarity of Bengali civilization in which poetry is intimately connected with daily existence, that is why this poetry is so closely in contact with the fundamental things of life—leaves and grass, flowers and rivers birth and death. Rabindranath seems to be the first among saints who has not refused to live. Yeats and many other critics find in the poems of *Gitanjali* another signal characteristic which is the result of the wedding of poetry to life. In these poems there is harmony between emotion and idea, between religion and

philosophy. Says Yeats, "A tradition where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble". Rabindranath is on this view, a great poet partly because he is the poet of a poetical race.

The *Hibbert Journal* (1912) suggested that the principal quality of the poetry of *Gitanjali* is directness: "it is one of the first and the finest expressions of a pure religious fervour which has not needed for its passion and inspiration the attachment to some intermediate object, some physical incarnation of deity, some human or semi-human personality, some definite historical or national channel of access to the divine." One great merit of these poems is the way in which the presence of God is suggested; there is no physical incarnation of the Deity and yet He is not denuded of human personality. In *The Garden of Epicurus* Anatole France makes fun of the language of metaphysics which takes words with concrete meanings but "fines down" and attenuates their concreteness and then uses them as abstractions which are only concrete terms with their concreteness effaced. This seems to make metaphysics an obscure and meaningless science, for the abstract is "nothing but the ashes of the concrete". One most pertinent illustration of this process is the word *God* which originally meant the shining one and now stands as a vague symbol of the Absolute. If anywhere in literature *God* is a living person who is yet to be distinguished from an idol, it is in the pages of *Gitanjali*. An analysis of any one poem in the series will show how much the *God* of *Gitanjali* differs from a mere metaphysical abstraction or a mere physical incarnation. *God* is friend, brother, comrade, bridegroom, helmsman but He is chiefly an all-pervasive presence that illumines the sky and makes the dust of the earth shoot in numberless blades of grass and break into tumultuous waves of leaves

and flowers. He is hidden in the heart of things, but He is nourishing seeds into sprouts, buds into blossoms and ripening flowers into fruitfulness. In many poems this pervasive presence of God is suggested in a very delicate and subtle manner. The poet is waiting in expectation for the happy moment when he will be able to see God, in the meantime the air is filling with the perfume of promise, or the poet had fallen asleep when God came with a harp, but the poet's dreams became resonant with the music of the harp.

This quality is present in all his images which are taken from the common familiar things of life. If he has to express vastness and majesty, he thinks of a glad bird spreading its wings on its flight across the sea. When he has to give an idea of the brilliance of God's sword, he refers to the outspread wings of the divine bird of Vishnu—a figure familiar in Hindu mythology—perfectly poised in the red light of the sunset. In some places the majesty of God is suggested with the help of the simplest things of nature. Although there is the great music of the universe, God is attracted by the poet's plaintive, little strain and stops at his small cottage—with only a flower for a prize. The freedom, the mystery, and the vastness that will come with the poet's union with God are delicately suggested by means of an image within an image. "Who knows when the chains will be off, and the boat, like the last glimmer of sunset, vanish into the night?" It is an ancient poetic convention to find in nature a reflection of human moods or to express the significance of natural phenomena with the help of human imagery. The distinctive features of Rabindranath's images are their vividness and simplicity. A maiden feels gratified when she is asked to give water to a thirsty traveller, who if the story of *Chandalika* is to be connected with poem no 54 of *Gitanjali*, is Ananda the great disciple of Buddha. The girl feels a thrill of joy at this unexpected call which transforms her whole existence. When she pours out



water, the leaves rustle overhead, the cuckoo sings from the unseen dark and the perfume of *babla* flowers comes from the bend of the road. The rustling of leaves shows the pervasiveness of the thrill, the unseen dark in the cuckoo image suggests mystery, and there is a touch of unconventionality in the reference to the scent of *babla* flowers, which shows the uniqueness of the girl's emotion. When the traveller goes away, the sense of languor which overpowers the girl is thus rendered: "The morning hour is late, the bird sings in weary notes, *neem* leaves rustle overhead and I sit and think and think." In Indian villages, girls go out in the morning to gather flowers for the daily worship, and in the evening they draw water in pitchers from tanks and wells. These commonplace pictures are utilized by the poet to describe the advent of dawn and the descent of evening in poem no. 67. There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand silently to crown the earth and there comes the evening, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.

Although *Gitanjali* expresses intense yearning for union with God and although there is no lack of either richness or variety, the final impression it leaves is one of ineffable quietness. Even when the poet wants to emphasize an idea, he does it so gently that the peaceful atmosphere is not disturbed. In poem no. 38, for example, there is an agonized cry for meeting God, which is expressed through the repetition of the simple sentence—"I want thee, only thee." This bare ejaculation may not be poetical by itself, but it gains in richness and depth when the poet's longing finds its prototype in the night hiding within its bosom its petition for light\* and in the storm seeking its end in peace through its own

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\* Cp The desire of the moth for the star,  
Of the night for the morrow.

The reader will contract the restlessness and vague suggestiveness of Shelley's image with the precision and quietness of Rabindranath's

rebellion against peace. The images are strikingly picturesque, but more striking are the restraint, the economy in decoration and the emphasis on peace. Poem no 18 is redolent of Vaishnava ideology and imagery but the poet expresses his deep, disconsolate yearning in language that is as passionate as it is simple. There is repeated emphasis on his loneliness which becomes specially painful in the dark rainy evening, there is a suggestion of the poet's helplessness, and there is an agonized question. Why, indeed, should he be waiting at the door all alone? The mystery and the pathos reach their climax at the end of the poem when the dark night is no longer a background but is identified with the poet's heart which wanders wailing with the restless wind.

In many poems a single word appropriately put becomes profoundly significant and suggestive. The poet contrasts the smallness of his desires with the greatness of God's gifts. "Day by day thou art making me worthy of the simple, great gifts that thou gavest me unasked—this sky and the light, this body and the life and the mind—saving me from the perils of overmuch desire." The contrast between "simple" and "great" and the word "unasked" show the mysteriously beautiful ways of God and enable us to read a new significance into the things we take for granted. The King of the fearful night sent his message through the storm, but the poet did not heed it. Suddenly the King appears in thunder, lightning and darkness, and the poet exclaims, "Bring out thy tattered piece of mat and spread it in the courtyard." The tattered mat expresses his unpreparedness and his terror-stricken solicitude, with the bare, sheer penetrating power of Nature, which is in evidence in almost all the poems of this book. Mention may be made, for example of the lines quoted in Bridges' *The Spirit of Man*. "Things that I longed for in vain and things that I got—let them pass. Let me but truly possess the things that I ever spurned and overlooked." Every one of these words is significant.

but specially worthy of note are the repetition of "things", the adverbs 'but' and 'truly' and the contrast between the verbs in the different clauses. It will suffice if amongst a host of examples, only one more is cited here. It is one of Rabindranath's most distinctive ideas that man is as necessary for God as God is for man, that it is through man that God's love fulfils itself. One of the simplest and most effective expressions of this idea is to be found in poem no. 56. 'Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is thou hast come down to me. O thou lord of all heavens, where would thy love be if I were not? It is easy to see how the poet expresses his idea by employing the minimum number of words—almost all in monosyllables. how the emphasis in 'Thus it is' in the beginning of the first two sentences is explained in the second part of the third sentence, and how it is further strengthened by the contrast between 'I' and "all heavens" and the interrogation which seems to come abruptly at the end of the stanza.

### III

Not the least remarkable feature of *Gitanjali* is the exquisite rhythm of its prose poetry, which cannot escape even the most casual reader. Bengalis know that the original lyrics are 'full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention' which they will miss in the English version. But the translations, if *they are devoid of certain qualities of the original have a beauty of their own*. When the poet translated them, he seemed to be different and said modestly to Rothenstein 'My translations are frankly prose—my aim is to make them simply prose with just a suggestion of rhythm to give them a touch of the lyric, avoiding all archaisms and poetical conventions. But when he introduced his Bengali prose poems he claimed that although the English *Gitanjali* was not written in verse, it was certainly poetry by shedding

the bondage of metre, it had attained a freedom of movement which would be beyond the scope of verse

It is necessary to enquire in detail into the rhythmic qualities of these translations which have appealed to readers all over the world. Saintsbury argues that rhythmic prose is amenable to the same laws of quantification as verse, but with some characteristic differences. In English metrical verse, there are the iamb, the trochee, the dactyl, the anapaest and only rarely, the amphibrach—all containing feet of either two or three syllables. The greater freedom of prose admits feet containing four (paeon) or five (dochmiac) syllables. When the pause comes after six or more syllables, there is no longer rhythmic prose but prose in general. The main point of distinction between metrical verse and rhythmic prose is that in the former the principle followed is one of sameness, equivalence and variety whereas the latter depends on difference, inequality and diversity. The free verse of Macpherson's *Ossian*, of Blake's "prophetic" books and of Walt Whitman's poems has the characteristic qualities of both verse and rhythmized prose; and Saintsbury calls it hybrid verse prose. It displays much greater freedom than metrical verse but retains poetic diction and also a mechanical division of word groups somewhat similar to that of verse. The unit in free verse as in regular verse is the line rather than the sentence, although it rejects the principle of actual recurrence and quantitative equivalence between one foot and another.

The rhythm of *Gitanjali* is not that of metrical verse or of free verse, but there is greater recurrence than in rhythmic prose such as that of Browne, Ruskin and Pater. Indeed, its only parallel in English literature is the rhythm of the Authorized Version in its more passionate passages such as the Sixtieth Chapter of Isaiah quoted and scanned by Saintsbury. In quieter moments when the poet expresses tiredness or languor, there is not much of

recurrence ; he has recourse to ordinary prose with a slight underflow of rhythm:

"We sang: no glad songs: nor played ; we went not to the village: for barter: we spoke not a word: nor smiled We lingered not: on the way."

But as he becomes more and more passionate, his rhythm catches the lilt of verse movement, and very often we feel that it is poetic rhythm which has only been broadened by the greater freedom of prose. The following examples will show how Rabindranath makes use of the principle of recurrence and equivalence peculiar to metrical verse and yet introduces the variety, breadth and difference that we can expect only from rhythmic prose:

(a) Let only / that little / of my fétters / be léft /  
whereby / I am bóund / with thy wíll / and thy  
púrpose / is cárried out / in my lífe / and thát  
is / the fétter / of thy lóve.

(b) Thóu hast / máde me / éndless, / súch is / thy  
pléasure, / This fráil / véssel / thou / émptiest /  
agáin and agáin / and fillest it / éver / with  
frésh lífe

(c) By what díim shore / of the ínkbbláck / ríver / by  
what fár édge / of the frówníng / fórest / through  
what mázy / dépth of gloom / art thou thréad /  
íng\* thy cóurse / to cóme / to mé, / my fríend.

#### IV

*Fruit-Gathering*, as its sub-title appropriately describes it, is a sequel to *Gitanjali*, because the poems collected here deal with the old theme of the poet's relationship

\* The general rule is that in prose foot-division should be at the end of a word rather than in the middle. But the rule need not be rigidly followed.

with the Creator. But although there is this fundamental affinity between the two books many of the poems in *Fruit Gathering* strike original notes and there is greater variety in it than in *Gitanjali* which is superior in the manner in which the central theme is evolved through successive stages as also in the more rhythmic quality of its prose. *Fruit Gathering* contains a number of stories taken from Indian legends and ballads and there are more poems here than in any other book on the poet's bereavement at the death of his wife.

But in spite of this association with sorrow the most remarkable thing in *Fruit Gathering* is the note of cheerfulness and exuberance struck in many of its poems. Nature is full of joyousness and richness and so is human life. This idea is expressed through many images of rare freshness and charm. Summer's festival is as much for new blossoms as for withered leaves and the master stands not only on jewelled carpets but also on patient clods which wait to be touched by his feet. This richness which the poet finds in nature has been transfused into his own life too. It is interesting to mention some of the images—drawn from nature and art—by means of which the restless joy of the poet is envisaged. Life quivers in his limbs like the sounding strings of the lute, his dreams flit around like moths with their many coloured wings and his eyes are washed with delight like the dew bathed morning. At the call of God the poet has come out into the open and is overwhelmed by a surge of joy which makes him feel kinship with the common dust. This joyousness which spreads over the poet's life only when he comes out of his narrow selfishness makes him realize the beauty of creation in the inmost recesses of his being. In this realization all barriers of separation are removed, all the stars shine in him and all the youthfulness of land and water smokes like an incense in his heart. The images are all taken from commonplace things but they become suggestive because of the human significance the poet reads into them and

this suggestiveness is derived from God who is immanent in His creation and yet transcends it, because He is essentially a player who is constantly playing at the game of life and winning and losing at the same time

As *The Times* appropriately pointed out the mystery or the special quality of the lyrics in *Fruit Gathering* is—and this would be true of Rabindranath's poetry generally—that being the words of a mystic, they are still poems of the common world we know. The unknown is beautiful because it shines through the known, and it is only in the unknown that we have perpetual freedom. That is the reason why the pearl bursts its shell and the odour cries restlessly in the prison of the bud. It is only natural that the poet should try to express the soul's longing for the far off through nuptial imagery. What is most distinctive about his images is the way in which the presence of the unknown is suggested. The image of the lover and the ladylove which occupies such an important place in Vaishnava poetry is an earthly image, it is admirably suited to the expression of intense yearning but as the unknown lover soon becomes an intimate friend, the suggestion of something afar wears off. This is the limitation of Vaishnava poetry in which religious fervour is submerged in the ecstasy of earthly love. For Rabindranath, however, the unknown retains his far offness, although he is constantly wooing the human soul. The Bridegroom is also the Boatman who comes from a distant shore, crossing the wild sea at night. The poet creates an atmosphere of terror and mystery not only by his general descriptions of storm and darkness but also by such realistic touches as the wild shrieking through the broken doors and the light of the earthen lamp flinging tremulous shadows on the walls. What the quest is that makes the Boatman care neither for storm nor darkness nobody knows. But he comes not with gems or pearls but with a flower in his hand and a song on his lips to woo the woman of the unknown name waiting for him in the dust. The reference to the flower and

the song which are such a refreshing contrast to the storm and the darkness shows the mysteriously enchanting ways of the Boatman who is reckless of danger and conquers not with earth's riches but with earth's beauty (*no. 11*).

The dalliance of lovers presupposes a duality which is in the heart of life: it is found as much in the individual as in the larger life of the universe. There dwells a woman in the poet's heart, whom the poet cannot please although he woos her with songs and flowers as also with gifts more materially valuable. But she is for ever unsatisfied, for ever forlorn, for she is waiting endlessly for the beloved of the unknown name (*no. 57*). It is through this duality which is a part of the essence of life that God's purpose fulfils itself. The mystery of the woman is in the heart of creation; the Eternal One breaks in two in order that he may enjoy his own outflowing sweetness, for it is only by taking the shape of a woman that God steals the joy of the universe which is His own creation. The likening of the world's passion for God to a lover's longing is not original with Rabindranath; what is distinctive of his poetry is the variety of images called forth by him, and the idea receives, too, an added poignancy when we remember that the poet's pining for his lost wife has become the symbol of the agony of the universe on account of its separation from God.

Nothing in nature is more suggestive of mystery than the night, and it is only fitting that Rabindranath should sing of night and its terrors and enchantments. It is in the darkness of night that the mystic seeks answers to his questions and it is in the darkness of night, again, that sages have received gifts from the hands of the unknown. That is why the poet exclaims: "Make me thy lyre, O Night, veiled Night" (*no. 20*). On other occasions it is night's terrors rather than its charms that appeal to the poet. Night on this view is like a dragon or a fallen god lying in a desolate heaven of lost hopes. Life seems to have been caught in the embrace of this dragon from which it pants to be free, and freedom comes mysteriously with the



morning light which brings the gifts denied by night. The strangest thing about the advent of morning is that its message comes to the small bird even when night has not yet departed and it is enveloped in the twofold darkness of the sky and the leaves. But it is this message first received by the bird which is the deepest assurance to man of the joy and the freedom which are the greatest gifts of life (nos 25—26)

The Creator of the universe does not hold himself aloof from his creation, rather he fulfils himself through what happens on earth. Rabindranath worships the God of peace but this peace is not quiescence or stagnation for it comes out of the cleft heart of strife. A remarkable feature of the poems in which he expresses his reaction to worldly events such as the Great War of 1914 is the feeling of intimate relationship between God and human affairs. Human ideals become lofty only because God inspires them and God too is not a mere theological conception but the Boatman who guides humanity through a sea of carnage and revelry or the Beautiful One who defies monsters that disfigure the world with ugliness. His ways are indeed mysterious when evil is rampant. He punishes the evil doers not by subjecting them to tribulation but by holding before them the mute pain of sleepless love, the bird's notes in springtime and the innocent blush of the chaste. That beauty and goodness blossom forth in spite of the ravages of evil doers is the most terrible judgment that may be inflicted on evil. Equally strange is God's forgiveness. When the weight of evil becomes too heavy, God out of His mercy sends storm and the thunderstone scattering the thefts of greed in the dust. This puts a novel interpretation on the misfortunes coming from God. Such misfortunes are not causeless, neither are they retributive; they are intended only to remove the load of evil which becomes too immense to scatter in any other way (no 26)

In the poem on the trumpet and in *the Oarsmen* Rabindranath expresses a passionate idealism asking men

to wean themselves away from cowardly peace and from arrogance, pride and rancour. Much of the beauty of the former poem is derived from an effective contrast between the torpor of ordinary religious service and the militant devotion which inspires pilgrims to carry God's flag and to raise God's trumpet from the dust. "O thou blood red rose," exclaims the poet, "my poppies of sleep have piled and faded." The other poem, which is more elaborate, gives a lurid picture of the evils of life which, by a marvellous feat of imagination, the poet transfigures into a tempest that has, like a ripe pod, broken its heart into pieces, scattering thunders. Much of the vividness of the portraiture is due to the poet's calm confidence that behind the storm and the cloud there is the Eternal One whose anger expresses itself in the terrible orgy of the elements. The most beautiful lines in the poem are those in which it is revealed that the Deathless dwells in the heart of death and glad wisdom will bloom out of the sheath of sorrow. This assurance of a larger life emerging out of death is found in Nature where stars efface themselves only to find a fuller realization in the light of the morning sun. The poet strikes a different note in *The Song of the Defeated* and *Thanksgiving* in which in a quiet mood he hugs the silence of the night in the hope that the Master will like to woo his bride not in the garish light of day but in the mystery of darkness. These two poems, especially *The Song of the Defeated*, are full of confidence, which, however, is saddened by the thought that the poet has been defeated and has to seek comfort in the secret depth of the night which throbs in expectation of the coming tryst with the Lord.

## V

*Crossing*, as its name implies, deals with the theme of man's departure from the finite world for the infinite. It is the primary difficulty of mystical poetry that it has to

depict man's yearning for the transcendental through images which are sensuous and human, and the excellence of such poetry depends largely on the success with which it expresses the ineffable through familiar symbols. Judged by this standard, few poets are greater than Rabindranath. He takes his images from everyday reality but succeeds in presenting them in such a way that they suggest the advent of the unknown. The musician and his harp or lute are visible and the music is audible. With the help of these images the poet thus expresses the mystical relationship between man and God. 'The peace of sadness is in my heart like the brooding silence upon the master's lute before the music begins. Let me carry thy love in my life as a harp does its music, and give it back to thee at last with my life (no 5). It is by a master stroke of imagination that the poet passes from audible music to that state in which it broods on the lute before being brought into life. The music comes to the harp from outside from the musician, but it permeates the harp in such a way that the two are indistinguishable. Thus the relation between the harp and the music becomes a fitting symbol for that between man and divine love.

Like other mystic poets Rabindranath makes frequent use of the image of the road which suggests endless way-faring. A detailed study of all his images of way-faring will throw light on his peculiar method but it will be too long for the present discussion. It will suffice if we consider here only the following lines from *Crossing*—63

'My King's road that lies still before my house makes my heart wistful. It stretches its beckoning hand towards me, its silence calls me out of my home, with dumb entreaties it kisses my feet at every step.

It leads me on I know not to what abandonment to what sudden gain or surprises of distress."

This poem comes almost immediately after nos 60—61, in which the poet speaks of the immanence of God who is with the crowd in the heart of its tumult. In the poem

about the king's road, extracts from which are quoted above, he delicately portrays God's far offness. The long stretches of the road, its inscrutable silence, its dumb contact with human life, its endless windings which bring a surprise at every moment—these are simple, familiar things, but they create an atmosphere of mystery and by making the heart wistful suggest the presence of the unknown who beckons from beyond the endless road.

It has been pointed out previously that Vaishnava poetry which is so rich in the portraiture of passion is too full of sensuousness to represent adequately man's craving for the Infinite. Rabindranath retains the image of the lover and the beloved but by mingling it with the image of the road creates that impression of remoteness which is essential to mystical poetry. *Crossing—50* deserves to be quoted in full.

'I was with the crowd when I was on the road  
Where the road ends I find myself alone with you  
I knew not when my day dimmed into dusk and my  
companions left me  
I know not when your doors opened and I stood surprised  
at my own heart's music

But are there still traces of tears in my eyes though the  
bed is made, the lamp is lit, and we are alone, you and I?

The lamp, the bed, the loneliness in which two persons have no third companion, the tears—all these point to the meeting of lovers, but the other references are suggestive of a long journey at the end of which the human soul frees itself from mortal fetters and finds God's doors flung wide before him. It has been mentioned by more than one critic that except for his nuptial imagery Rabindranath is always referring to things lying in the open air—flowers and rivers roads and skies. What needs emphasis is the combination of open air images with those of the bridal chamber so that his poetry can produce a unique impression of picturesqueness and remoteness as

also of intensity and depth. The following poem may be taken as an illustration:

"The wedding hour is in the twilight, when the birds have sung their last and the winds are at rest on the waters, when the sunset spreads the carpet in the bridal chamber and the lamp is made ready to burn through the night.

"Behind the silent dark walks the Unseen Comer and my heart trembles.

All songs are hushed,  
for the service will be read under the evening star" (no. 13).

Amongst the Hindus the twilight hour is often selected as an auspicious moment for marriage; the bridegroom who comes from a distant place is generally an unknown man whom the bride meets with a trembling heart for the first time in the wedding hour. By using capital letters the poet makes the bridegroom the symbol of God, and the tremulous heart of the bride is an apt image of the human heart yearning for divine love. The poet lays emphasis on the twilight hour, and quite unobtrusively the narrow bridal chamber expands itself into the vast universe, the sunset spreads the carpet and the moon and the stars are the lamp that will celebrate the hymeneal night.

All poetry is image-making, and nowhere is this faculty more in evidence than in these poems in which the poet tries to express with the help of sensuous images the unutterable, the transcendent. Nature provides him with an inexhaustible fund of images for the portraiture of his yearning for and contact with the Infinite. In some poems it supplies him also with suggestive parallels for his own feelings. Like Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra, Rabindranath feels confident that what seems to miss success is not altogether lost (no. 18). This confidence is generated in him by the flowers that fade in the dawn and the streams that stray in the desert, because they only seem to be lost but are really preserved to find their fulfilment in a completer existence. The flowers that have faded and

the streams that have strayed are not connected with each other, the poet finds a deep significance which not only unites them but makes them illuminate human life. In another poem (*no 69*), the poet wants his song to be simple—as simple as the dropping of dew from the leaves, as the colour in clouds and showers of rain in midnight. In these images, as in those previously referred to, a secret significance is found in the apparently meaningless things in nature, and as this significance is derived from human life, there is a wonderful combination of intimacy and remoteness.

In other images, natural objects are not utilized as mere suggestive parallels but there is a complete infusion of humanity or divinity into nature. This identification of a feeling with its image enables the poet to express his most intense yearning which without such aid, would be incommunicable. As an example of the transitional image we may mention the following

“For my incense never yields its perfume till it burns,  
and my lamp is blind till it is lighted” (*no 6*)

In this image the incense and the lamp only furnish the poet with examples of how through the fire of pain he may expect to realize the deeper purpose of his life, but in the intensity of agonized expectation, he also becomes one with the incense and the lamp. An example of the complete absorption of natural image into human feeling is found in

‘For the sorrowing sky has shadowed my solitude  
to deepen the meaning of thy touch about my heart  
(*no 20*)

In the above picture Nature has entered the poet's life and revealed its secret meaning. The intimate connection between God and the terrestrial world of man and Nature is seen in the following image

‘Stand upon the golden mantle she has flung upon thy  
path, and let me feel in her grass and meadow flowers the  
spread of my own salutation’ (*no 54*)

The earth has a covering of grass, the most familiar object in Nature, but this grass is a carpet prepared by her for God, and it is in the grass as also in the meadow flowers that the poet finds the expression of his own salutation of God. Yet another image deserves to be quoted, for like many others it illustrates the mingling of the two kinds of image making mentioned above. This occurs in *Crossing—11*

"The wistful face of the earth weaving its autumn mists wakens longing in my heart, if it is in vain still it is sweet to feel the pain of longing"

The earth weaving its autumn mists wakens longing in the poet's heart, it supplies the poet with an excellent parallel to his own wistfulness. But the parallel would be meaningless if man's longing did not enter Nature. It is the wistfulness in the poet's heart that has been communicated to the earth and from there it returns to arouse longing in him. There are occasions when human life with its network of feelings and associations supplies the poet with hopes of immortality. In *Crossing—71*, the poet reviews his life with its daily surprises, its intimate connections with nature and sees how in all periods flowers and insects and birds and clouds have had their fullest value of wonder for him. If that is so, death will mean only the lifting of the curtain, and in the new morning his life will be awakened in its fresh surprise of love. The whole of the life he has known becomes thus a vivid symbol of what is unknown.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DRAMAS—DIRECT AND SYMBOLIST—I

#### I

Rabindranath's dramas fall roughly into two classes—the earlier, non symbolic dramas such as *Sacrifice* and *The King and the Queen* and the later symbolic dramas such as *The Post Office*, *The Cycle of Spring* and *Red Oleanders*. Of the non symbolic plays, some are one scene playlets like *Karna and Kunti* or *Kacha and Devayani* (*The Curse at Farewell*) *Malini* and *The Sanyasi*, which are slightly larger, may, from the technical point of view, be regarded as a sort of preparation for major plays like *Sacrifice*. These two plays are also a hyphen between his symbolic and non symbolic work. Although the poet is here concerned primarily with the delineation of human character rather than with putting forward suggestions about the unseen and the inaudible, he seems to emphasize some particular aspect of character, and the total impression is as much of the reality and concreteness of the characters as of the embodiment of some spiritual idea.

Of the non symbolic plays some are so short that they may be called dramatic scenes rather than plays. Of these the most famous are *Karna and Kunti* and *Kacha and Devayani*, but comparatively inferior works such as *The Mother's Prayer*, *Ama and Vinayaka* and *Somaka and Ritwik* should be considered first. Of these three *Ama and Vinayaka* is remarkable as showing the author's catholic sympathies, because he makes a heroine of a Hindu woman who was abducted by a Muslim and remains faithful to him who loved her deeply and became the father of her child. She herself says that her body was yielded after love had been given her—love all the greater, all the purer, in that it overcame the hereditary recoil of our blood from the



Mussalman' She defends this love against the attack made on it by her father and mother, but this defence, though eloquent, does not make the portraiture dramatically effective. It is only Amavai's attitude to love rather than her character that is portrayed, and this attitude is represented as a thing detached from her personality, as it does not evolve through her experience, it lacks the mobility that is the hall mark of life. Much the same comment may be made of *The Mother's Prayer* where there is a contrast of three attitudes, all equally static. There is not much of dramatic significance in *Somaka and Ritvil*, but there is excellent symbolic suggestiveness in the picture of a hell to which are consigned men who have followed the letter of religion rather than the spirit, who in their pride, immolate the emotion of love and glorify inhuman piety. It is a hell where live only shades who have no soul, whose life is mere emptiness, who do not enjoy heaven's bliss and have forfeited their share of earth's joys and sorrows. Only the recital of crime can still bring life's fire into the torpor of this land where the air is like suffocation to the eyes.

In *Kacha and Devayani* and *Karna and Kunti*, which are short dialogues, full of vitality, one of the characters is utilized to reveal subtle changes in the other. Young Kacha came from Paradise to learn the secret of immortality from the sage who taught the Titans, and on the completion of his work he goes back to communicate his knowledge to the Gods. While engirded in study he awakened love in the sage's daughter Devayani who thought that her feelings found a response in Kacha and she proudly expected that she would be able to hold him back from going to Paradise. In Kacha's mind there seems to have been a conflict between the claims of love and those of duty, but he has overcome it, giving primacy to the mission for which he was deputed by the Gods. Devayani, for whom that mission has little significance beside the claim of her own love, wants Kacha to stay with her. Although she feels strongly and expresses herself eloquently when the need

arises, she beats about the bush at first, for with a woman's delicacy she wants to keep her secret to herself, and with a woman's pride she wants to be wooed by her lover before she woos him. Thompson appropriately describes the movement of her mind as a "gradual unveiling of the love which she feels that Kacha ought to unveil for her."

At first she asks Kacha to go deep into his mind and see if in the successful completion of his studies there is not somewhere some unsatisfied craving, if the success of his mission as a student does not mean a wrench in another sphere. Kacha's self complacency amazes as much as it irritates her. She now takes the help of irony and mockery to force him to an avowal of his passion for her. But even these fail to melt the frigid scholar intent upon returning to Paradise. Too proud and too shy to speak openly about herself, Devayani now draws Kacha to a recital of the things that sweetened his exile in the forest hermitage. Kacha pays his tribute to all the things mentioned by Devayani but does not go beyond her own list. Thus baffled in all her attempts to draw Kacha out, she at last makes an open declaration about herself, though even here the last veil of womanly delicacy is not withdrawn. Says she "But, friend, let me also remind you that you had another companion whose thoughts were vainly busy to make you forget an exile's cares." Kacha's admission that the memory of this companion has become a part of his life deludes the girl, otherwise so clever, sensitive and proud. She gradually throws off all her reserve, christises Kacha for remembering her as a benefactress rather than as the symbol of beauty and love. Love's fond credulity makes her read into Kacha's restrained, cryptic and halting response more than was intended by the speaker, and she embarks on an eloquent vindication of love which overrides every other consideration, indeed, she points out that if it were not so the devoted student would not have, in the intervals of studies, beguiled his time in the company of Devayani. When she discovers that all her passionate outbursts have failed to

deflect Kacha from his purpose, she ends not merely on a note of disappointment but also on one of fierce denunciation. Very pathetically does she picture the part played in her life by Kacha who wore a garland with flowers gathered from the garden of her life but on the day of departure snapped the thread and allowed the flowers to wither in the dust. Suddenly the pathos of frustration leads to a sterner mood, and like a Fury she thus execrates the man who has blasted her life: "Accursed be that great knowledge you have earned! . . . For lack of love may it ever remain as foreign to your life as the cold stars are to the unespoused darkness of virgin Night!"

*Karna and Kunti*, the best of these dramatic scenes, is superior to *Kacha and Devayani* for two reasons amongst others. There is the vast background of the epic war, and there is also a sense of remoteness, awe and mystery which is peculiar to this meeting of a son with his mother whom he knows only as the mother of his antagonist. Before marriage, Kunti had a son Karna, whom, to hide her shame, she abandoned at birth and who was brought up by the charioteer Adhiratha. Karna became in manhood a fierce warrior, the rival of Arjuna and the commander of the Kaurava host. On the evening before the battle Karna sits by the bank of the holy Ganges to say his prayers to the setting sun when he meets a mysterious woman who claims to have first acquainted him with the light he worships. This is a suggestive, though vague, assertion but more suggestive are the woman's voice and the eyes which seem to take him beyond his earliest memory. Kunti waits for a full exposition till the darkness of the night has closed in upon the prying eyes of the day. It is necessary to refer to the part played in this drama by the silence and darkness of the night which combines with the vastness of the battlefield and the awful possibilities of warfare to create that atmosphere of mystery and gloom which is appropriate to this first and last meeting between the mother and the son.

On her first appearance the woman impressed Karna as a strange personage with whom he might be distantly connected, but the sense of mystery is heightened when the woman reveals herself as the mother of his rival Arjuna. While he remains spellbound, Kunti recounts an incident of his boyhood, showing how she has nursed a silent affection for him. On recovering from the shock of surprise with which the revelation of the visitor's identity overwhelmed him, he asks her about the purpose of her visit, and is amazed to learn from her that she is his own mother who has come to take him back to her arms. For a moment Karna, who previously heard a vague rumour that he had been abandoned by his mother, is overpowered with emotion at discovering her in the person of his antagonist's mother, and before the tremendous significance of this revelation, the struggle for victory and fame and the rage of hatred against Arjuna are suddenly emptied of meaning. When he had not clearly known that Kunti was his own mother, he who was celebrated for his charity had promised to give her all that was not barred by his manhood and his honour as a Kshatriya, and now when the veil which hid his mother has been finally withdrawn, in the overwhelming ardour of his emotion, all his other ties are temporarily suspended and he agrees to follow her, leaving all that has occupied him so long. But very soon he sees the impossibility of reviving the bond she snapped at his birth, he cannot return to the ruins of a heaven she wrecked with her own hands! As he recovers from the emotional confusion that was produced by the first impact of the knowledge about his mother, he gains clarity of vision and realizes that his manhood binds him to the mother at the charioteer's house and his honour as a Kshatriya will not release him from his loyalty to the chief of the Kaurava hosts. In the darkness of the night the future prefigures itself, as it were in a transparent mirror, his heart is full of the music of a hopeless venture and a baffled end. One reason why the mighty warrior is filled

with so much despondency is that his ambitions and attachments have become suddenly unreal. After he has known Kunti, Adhiratha's wife, whatever his obligations to her may be, has ceased to be his mother, and as the eldest of the Pandavas he cannot but recognize that the honour which binds him to the Kaurava chief has become a mockery. But he has struck his roots too deep in the charioteer's house and the Kaurava camp to sever himself now. That is why he ends on a note of utter dejection. "On the night of my birth you left me naked and unnamed to disgrace, leave me once again without pity to the calm expectation of defeat and death!"

## . . . II

*The Sanyasi (Nature's Revenge)* which is the earliest and simplest of the regular dramas, represents a recurring theme in Rabindranath's work—the joy of attaining the Infinite in the finite. In *My Reminiscences* the poet describes this play as the introduction to all his future work, because the gist of his whole literary output is the achievement of deliverance in the midst of bondage. This work represents, too, a stage in the poet's own development because like the Sanyasi he was absorbed in his self and like the Sanyasi he emerges into the open air life of natural beauty and human love, joy and sorrow. In Ernest Rhys words, 'he advanced out of the stage of youthful desire and entered upon the fair field full of folk, and became alive to those aspects of life to express which a poet must seek both dramatic and lyric forms of art.'

Although the drama contains a number of characters—men, women and children—not one of them with the exception of the hero is depicted in detail. They serve their dramatic purpose no doubt, for they represent the varied world of men and women with their trivial occupations from which the Sanyasi foolishly weaned himself to find truth in the emptiness of self and the

change in the soul of the hero is shown in the different attitudes he takes up towards these small people before and after he has met the girl Vasanti. At first when the whole world is for him an illusion, he looks at them with contempt, as he is free, he cannot shrink back into the smallness of these creatures. But once he has known Vasanti and parted from her, the paltry activities of life seem to acquire a new meaning for him. He becomes inquisitive about the men and women who flit before his eyes on their errands and blesses a ragged girl whom he would have been glad to retain by his side. From the point of view of art, the defect in the portraiture of these characters is that they just serve the purpose for which they have been introduced and do nothing more, they are not interesting on their own account. That is not the way in which an idea can be adequately dramatized or a drama can become fully alive. The importance of the Prince of Denmark in the play of *Hamlet* is proverbial, but all the minor characters are sharply limned and even Rosencrantz can be distinguished from Guildenstern.

The Sanyasi, the hero of the drama, impresses readers as well as spectators as a full length portrait. All the stages in the development of his soul are clearly indicated and the changes that come over him are adequately motivated. At first we find that he has withdrawn from the world and achieved freedom in a threefold manner. He has realized that all our intellectual activities are mere verbal jugglery and students of philosophy are little better than word pecking birds, he has seen through the hollowness of it all. He has achieved freedom, too, by annihilating all his desires, and as emotional susceptibility is connected with sensitiveness to the sights and sounds of nature, because both lead man out of the cave of self, he has steeled his heart against the appeal of beauty. "For me", says he, "the stream of time has stopped, on whose waves dances the world, like straws and twigs. In this dark cave, I am alone, merged in myself."

The change that comes over him comes subtly, without his being at first aware of it. When he meets Vasanti, the daughter of the outcast Raghu, he does not send her away as a man of the world would, because that would go against his creed of indifference. His attitude is summed up in what he himself says to the girl: "I never claim you as mine, therefore I can never discard you." Then amongst the procession of insignificant men and women who pass before their eyes, there comes a traveller who seeks a shelter but rejects the offer of Vasanti who is an outcast's daughter. The Sanyasi does not say anything, but it seems that imperceptibly his indifference has given way to pity for the poor girl who has been abandoned by the world. When the girl falls asleep, he becomes aware of his weakness and thinks of running away, but he stays on, because the new tie is only a spider's web; he thinks he is strong enough to break whenever he likes to do so. But very soon it becomes clear that the Sanyasi's indifference has begun to melt and his affection for the girl seems to give him a 'touch of the wand of the eternal'. Just at this moment when his emotional sensibilities are being awakened, Vasanti draws his attention to a beautiful object in nature, a creeper in which she finds the symbol of her own life. The Sanyasi feels that the citadel of his resistance is giving way, and he flies from the girl who is beginning to twine round him like a creeper. The rest of his story need not be analysed in detail. Even before he realizes the hollowness of his vows and begins to search for the poor girl here and there and everywhere, nature seems to appeal to him with a new power and suggestiveness, and it is in this sensitiveness to beauty that we find the first glimpse of a new life dawning upon him. The gold of the evening makes him exclaim in agony, "But where is my little girl, with her dark sad eyes, big with tears?" Even now he tries to get over his weakness, but the meeting with a ragged girl who reminds him of Vasanti, whom he asks several questions and whom he gives his blessings is the

last straw that breaks his resistance, and in the darkness of the night he finds a symbol of the pang of his separation from the poor girl whom he abandoned in obedience to his vows as a Sanyasi. When we see him next, he has freed himself from his empty vows and wants to swim once more in the stream of time. He has attained real freedom now, not the freedom of nothingness but freedom in the midst of 'things and forms and purpose'.

*Malini*, which is full of beauty, has been a puzzle to critics. Thompson calls it sketchy, because here the author suggests questions for whose solution he provides no data. Why, for example, does *Malini* plead for Kshemankar, after he has killed Supriya? Thompson quotes Professor Mahalanobis as saying, 'She (*Malini*) is torn between two impulses—or perhaps an ideal and an impulse, the life preached by Gautama and the other life of love and friendship. Both were vague, I think. Was she in love with Supriya? Or was it Kshemankar? Or was she in love with neither? Professor Lesny puts forward many other questions. 'Both reader and spectator, however, are faced by a number of questions and seriously doubt whether the dramatist really desired to solve the dispute between friendship and love. Was it not rather his aim to point out the excellency of the golden mean taught by Buddha? Is this the purpose of the conclusion when *Malini*, the heroine of the play, asks mercy for Kshemankar who has assassinated his friend? Or is Kshemankar, whose ways are guided by the old order, the hero of the play? But, after all, his instigation of the revolt cannot be sanctioned. Does not the sacrifice of Supriya appear to have been in vain?

The significant thing about *Malini* is that it portrays an unresolved conflict without pointing to any conclusion and here it resembles life—and Shakespearean tragedy. Supriya is swayed between two powerful personalities for both of whom the poet has equal aesthetic sympathy. Thompson rightly points out that the heroine is too tenuously drawn and that her conquest of the Brahmuns is



ridiculously simple. But the central character is not Malini but Supriya who finds in her something for which he looks in vain in her antagonist Kemankar. She is the personification of a religion of love which knows no exclusions. It is this religion, living and personal, and not the dead dogma he learnt in the scriptures that appeals to him. Indeed, it seems that even when he clung to the old religion, he was attracted more by the powerful personality of Kemankar, his friend and master than by the value of the edicts contained in it. When he is near Malini and Kemankar is away, the latter's influence is necessarily on the wane, and he is repelled, too, by his friend's reliance on force to which Malini's religion supplies such a refreshing contrast.

If we look at Malini from this point of view, her drama will become relatively simple. Hers is a religion of love which, being all inclusive, has as much need of the enemy as of the friend. That is why she comes out cheerfully to meet the Brahmins who demanded his banishment, and she wants to bring them round to her side. It is natural that she should be attracted to Kemankar—which of us is not?—because of his firmness and energy, and indeed, she realizes, too, that it is by coming into contact with such a man that her religion may renew itself. No man or no woman can be merely an exponent of a religion. There must be other sides to his or her character and it is to such a side in Malini that Supriya makes an appeal, though she is only dimly conscious of this. When she meets Supriya\* in Act II, she feels a strange timidity which she thinks is due to her ignorance and also to her awareness of the existence of the vast world in which she is, indeed, very small, but this nervous fright may be due also to the fact that Supriya has awakened in her heart a thrill to which she, as a devotee of a new religion has so far been a stranger. Indeed, her love for Supriya becomes apparent to herself and to us only when she approves of the manner in which her father wants to reward

him Love occupies a comparatively unimportant place in her life which is swayed primarily by the quest for religious truth and by the desire to know a man like Kemankar from whom she may have much to learn and whom she may have something to teach. Being herself a religious enthusiast, she appreciates Kemankar much more than she loves Supriya. That is why when Kemankar kills Supriya she is more anxious to save the murderer than to weep for the victim.

*Malini* has three important characters, *Chitra* has only two, and it was written—both in Bengali and in English—before *Malini*, but as it is more complex dramatically it is being considered after *Malini* rather than before it. In *Chitra* there is gradual development of character, the passage of time being marked as much by the stages in this development as by the appearance of the gods at regular intervals. What is dramatically more significant is that there is a subtle interplay of mood within mood and that although Arjuna and Chitra both drink the joys of sensuous love and both tire of it, their reactions to this experience are widely divergent. Chitra first met Arjuna in the disguise of a man, but Arjuna took no notice of her. Next morning she appeared before him in the dress of a woman but could make no impression on him on account of her plainness. Then she is endowed with perfect beauty and captivates Arjuna. Her dream is fulfilled, she grasps what may be called absolute joy, but she suddenly discovers that the dream is not as sweet as she hoped it would be. She feels that she has degraded Arjuna by ensnaring him in the toils of mere physical beauty and exclaims, 'Alas, that this frail disguise, the body, should make one blind to the light of the deathless spirit!' On her side the experience is not one of unmixed joy because she becomes painfully conscious that the rapturous embrace for which she hungered has been snatched away by a rival the disguise put upon her by the agency of the gods. She herself begged it as a boon from them but at the moment

of asking, she could not foresee what reaction the fulfilment of her dream would awaken in her own soul, "Ah, god of love," she cries out in anguish, 'what fearful flame is this with which thou hast enveloped me? I burn, and I burn whatever I touch'

When she first met Arjuna in the vesture of beauty given to her by the gods, she felt an ineffable rapture. As she herself expresses her experience, "Heaven and earth, time and space, pleasure and pain, death and life merged together in an unbearable ecstasy' Once she has become conscious of the duality within her and has had time to take into account the short duration of the spell woven by the gods, she makes full use of what has been given to her but views it with a sense of detachment. To Arjuna's suggestion that she might weave a wreath for him when he returns home, she says that such a love is not for a home, that the moment's happiness should be enjoyed at the moment without regret but also without any illusion about its permanence. When, in the midst of this enchantment, Arjuna awakes to a sense of manly duties and enquires about the warrior princess Chitra, she stops him, urging him to drink the moment's pleasure to the lees. When the period granted by the gods has drawn to a close and Arjuna has begun to tire of mere sensuous charm, she reveals herself in the fulness of her strength and weakness—as Chitra who has a man's strength and a woman's heart, who is neither a goddess to be worshipped nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth *with indifference*.

When Arjuna meets Chitra after she has been transformed into a beautiful woman, his past life seems to vanish into a dream and Chitra's beauty seems to be the only reality, the only thing worth striving for. But after the first flood of sensuous bliss is over, Arjuna becomes aware that he is passing his days in exile, that he must one day go home back, and he wonders how much of the exquisite thrill he has felt in Chitra's company may be made a

permanent possession. His attention is caught, too, by the sound of prayer bells from village temples, which is an indication that he wants to come out of the narrow confines of sensual pleasure and re-establish his contact with the larger world lying beyond. Soon his mind is full of thoughts of hunting, and he longs also for the peaceful security of a home where the moment's ecstasy may become an abiding treasure. He wants something to clasp, something that can last longer than pleasure, that can endure even through suffering. In the next scene he appears to be less interested in the enchantress beside him than in Princess Chitra who has captured his imagination by the stories of her bravery narrated by villagers. When he knows who Chitra is, he exclaims in wonder, 'Beloved my life is full!'

No discussion of this drama is complete if it does not take note of the trenchant criticism of its symbolism made by Professor J. C. Rollo in *The Mysore University Magazine*, 1922 and by Thompson who quotes Rollo with approval. Professor Rollo's view is that Chitra's sharing of her husband's thought is made to supersede that world of beauty, of dreams, of enchantment in which they have first loved each other, which may be regarded as heresy both to beauty and to love. Another objection put forward by Rollo and Thompson is that woman as represented here seems to exist for man's sake and that the chief end of woman's life is the giving of adequate nurture to her sons and of adequate service to her lord. In fact, she is worth every atom as much as he, and if the race has no mission but reproduction of its species, then it is the same dust and oblivion for both man and woman, if there exists anything more than this blind, physical purpose, then it exists equally for both. The defect of this view, so powerfully expressed, is that it makes a needless distinction between Arjuna and Chitra, besides missing the import of the mad festival they both enjoy through the grace of the gods. It is, indeed, true that mere love and beauty are not held forth

as the ultimate values of life and that the playmate of the night claims her place as the helpmeet of the day. But the playmate is not superseded by the helpmeet; rather do the two together make up the complete wife. When Chitra met Arjuna as a warrior-woman, or even as a plain woman, she made not the slightest appeal to him; it is only when she is decked in beauty, borrowed though that beauty is, that Arjuna finds in her the symbol of fulfilment, and if the nurture of the child is looked upon as an important function, it must be remembered that it is in the midst of enchantment and dreams that the child is conceived. Motherhood comes after conjugal felicity, but that does not mean that it supplants the love and beauty in a bride's life. It is, indeed, true, that the poet does not place an exclusive value on mere love and beauty, but that does not mean that they are less important than community in thought and action. He is holding forth the ideal of complete love in which sensuous enjoyment has its proper place but is not allowed to supersede life's sterner duties. And if this is true of Chitra, equally is it true of Arjuna who needs her as much she needs him. The birth of the child is the realization of life's purpose for both of them, and when his mysterious playmate reveals herself as no goddess but as a woman and an expectant mother, Arjuna exclaims that his life has achieved fulness. It is this fulness of love in which man and woman share equally that is the message of this drama, and it will be mistaking the poet's purpose if, criticizing along Ibsenist lines, we draw an artificial distinction between Chitra's mission in life and Arjuna's.

### III

*The King and the Queen* is a complex drama with a large number of characters, and it is not difficult to trace Ibsenist influence in the portraiture of the queen Sumitra who refuses to be a mere doll and wants to assert her right-

ful place as the mother of the people. This play is a tragedy, showing the disastrous effects which must follow if a man or, for the matter of that, a king wants to substitute a part of life for the whole of it if he tries to make permanent the eager embrace with which lovers greet each other on their first meeting. Thompson thinks that *The King and the Queen* should have been Rabindranath's greatest drama if he had taken advantage of his chances and had not let it sprawl through a jungle of only secondarily relevant matter. Whatever the possibilities in the theme might be, *The King and the Queen* is a failure as drama not so much on account of the prominence given to mere secondary detail—in the English version there is very little of it—as because of the fundamental weakness in the delineation of the hero. King Vikram is like the protagonist of the heroic plays in eighteenth century England, he is always in an extravagant mood easily passing from hysterics of love to those of war and revenge. There is a ring of greatness even in the most passionate speeches of Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but when Vikram runs after Sumitra begging for her favours he looks like a demented voluptuary, a proper case for pathological examination. He does not listen to his wife or to his friend or to his minister and seems in his neurosis to have forgotten the existence of the world outside his palace of pleasure. There is little of human warmth in his passion which expresses itself in an attempt to wean itself from larger activities and in effeminate supplications to his wife. When his wife has left him he says that he has attained freedom but he really passes from one monomania to another retaining in this phase of his life his old unreasonableness and blindness to reality. It is only in the last part of the play when he meets Ila that there is a dawning of sense in him but by then the catastrophe is complete. Sumitra and Devadatta might have become convincing but the King occupies so much space and casts his blighting influence so deeply that these and other

figures cannot freely develop in their own ways. It is only the elfin figure of Ila that brings real poetry and real drama into this extravaganza, but hers is only a fleeting presence, and she comes too late into the play to redeem its vital flaws

*Sacrifice*, which is dramatically the best of Rabindranath's non-symbolic plays, is remarkable in many ways. It has an intricate plot which is evolved through well-marked stages; it has a large number of characters, every one of whom has a distinctive personality; and in developing the plot and the characters the author exercises wise economy that shuts out all irrelevant detail. Although the plot is complex with one important sub-plot and although there are many characters, the dramatist observes the unities of time and place. The incidents take place in the temple where gather all the characters from King Govinda to the beggar girl Aparna. The question of sacrificing animals before the image of Kali, the Goddess of power and destruction, is the theme of the play which ends with the throwing away of the image by Raghupati, the fanatical worshipper of the deity. The image thus stands as the symbol of the unity of the drama, and the change in Raghupati's attitude indicates the revolution that comes over the human world. The conflict starts in the beginning of the drama when King Govinda forbids sacrifice, it reaches a climax at dead of night when Raghupati and Nakshatra prepare to sacrifice Druba, the foster-child of King Govinda, and the catastrophe comes in the early hours of the morning when Jai Sing kills himself; there is also a complete revulsion in the mind of Raghupati who throws the image away and retires with Aparna.

The poet dedicated *Sacrifice* "to those heroes who bravely stood for peace when human sacrifice was claimed for the Goddess of War." This is a clear indication that the problem of sacrifice was intended to be the subject-matter of the play. Should any ideology—religious or political—demand the slaughtering of unwilling victims for

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its furtherance? One of the merits of this drama is that this overt theme suggests many other subsidiary topics. The Goddess Kali is deprived for all time of animal sacrifice, but it is necessary for Jai Sing to immolate himself so that he may not be driven from doubt to doubt. The interest of this drama is derived partly from the conflict in his soul between the demands of religion put forward by Raghupati and the claims of humanity which speaks through the seductive voice of Aparna. Yet another theme is the contest between kingly power and the priest's authority which brooks no interference within the sacred precincts of a temple. Is Raghupati an Indian Becket who realizes through varied experiences the absurdity of his pretensions?

Raghupati is the most outstanding character in this drama, he would be outstanding in any drama. He is learned in the scriptures and worships Kali, the grim Goddess with the necklace of human skulls, a symbol of the destructive energy of the universe. The sacrifice of animals is a part of the daily worship of Kali, the rites of which animal sacrifice is an important item have been allowed by the scriptures, and Raghupati's acceptance of these rites prescribed by sacred books and hallowed by tradition is almost instinctive. Along with the orthodox Hindu's faith in the scriptures and in the Goddess, he has his Brahmin's pride, because he is the lord of the temple and even the King has to do obeisance to him. Although a learned man, he has never questioned the basis of his beliefs and the rites which he performs have become almost a part of himself. Whenever he has found anything which he has not been able to reconcile to his reason, he has accepted the incongruity without demur because the traditional conception of the Goddess is that she is full of caprice and above human weal and woe. She is the presiding deity over time as also the Goddess of destruction and around her neck hangs a garland of human skulls. The daily sacrifice of innumerable innocent animals has never

disturbed Raghupati's soul "Old Time", says he, "is ever writing the chronicle of the transient life of creatures in letters of blood. When King Govinda prohibits sacrifice, he receives a violent shock—as a devout Hindu whose religious faith has been flouted, as an upholder of the immemorial tradition which no man may violate and as a Brahmin priest whom the secular power has defied. There is a tremendous commotion in his soul and he wants to preserve the religion which none can be allowed to tamper with, and he wants also to punish Govinda who had the presumption to disobey the scriptures and to override the Brahmin priest. He plans to foment rebellion in the army, but fails, he tries to set brother against brother, but fails again, and then he accepts the scheme of killing Druba as an offering and fails once more. When he finds that he has only one day's lease of life at Tripura, he takes the desperate step of sending Jai Sing to kill King Govinda and serve royal blood as oblation to the Goddess. Jai Sing's suicide causes the second great revulsion in his soul, and at the end he recoils with a shudder from the heartless religion he has preached and practised so far. At the conclusion of the drama there is calmness after all passion has been spent. Thompson's criticism that Raghupati's change is sudden and unreasonable is not tenable, a careful study of the text shows that the seeds of the change have been sown in the earliest part of the drama. Although Raghupati's one mission is to uphold the traditional religion the priest has a personal life, too, and this personal life in which the one master passion is affection for Jai Sing runs like an under-current, deep and strong, but not prominent on the surface. Jai Sing's attachment to King Govinda stirs him to jealousy, for he wants to keep Jai Sing all to himself. That is why when Jai Sing expresses surprise that of all persons the king should have forbidden sacrifice, he exclaims in a tone of embittered mockery 'Ungrateful! I have given all my love to bring you up and yet King Govinda is dearer to you than I am.' When Jai Sing kneels

down before Govinda he feels insulted as a Brahmin but he also feels piqued as a teacher and master. Much as he likes to kill Govinda he hates the idea of Jai Sing doing it and the weakness of his heart becomes at once apparent. But my boy, I have reared you from your childhood and you have grown close to my heart! I can never bear to lose you by any chance. This feeling is more intimate than the attachment of a teacher to his pupil it is a father's affection for his child. One reason why he bungles his business when along with Nakshatra he plans to kill Druba is that he feels a nervous tremor in his heart the boy reminds him of Jai Sing when Jai Sing first came to him. One remembers Lady Macbeth failing to murder Duncan because the old man resembled her father! When later on circumstances force him to send Jai Sing on the desperate venture of killing Govinda his mind is haunted by doubts his old strength is gone and he appeals piteously to Kali whom he has worshipped as a Goddess of destruction to save Jai Sing. He prays for victory to the mission but he also prays as a father may pray for the safety of his son. It is natural that when Jai Sing kills himself before the Goddess the emotional shock that comes over Raghupati will be so violent as to shake the basis of his faith and then the only thing real for him is the sweet name of father left behind by Jai Sing on Aparna's lips.

All the other characters have distinctive personalities the most effective dramatically is Jai Sing in whom there is a tortured conflict between the instinct of pity awakened by Aparna and love for Govinda and the religious piety which has become ingrained in him and of which the symbol is his teacher Raghupati who is almost like a father to him. The impression of adequacy and appropriateness produced by the characters is reinforced by the way in which the plot is handled. Special mention may be made only of the underplot to remove Druba which Thompson objects to on various grounds all of which seem to be unsound. Gunavati's offerings have been rejected and

she has been unable to shake Govinda from his purpose. She has felt insulted as a queen, she is in a huff as a wife, and what is more, her yearning for motherhood has been thwarted. In her desire for revenge, she naturally thinks of Druba, because it is on account of this boy that her husband does not feel the necessity for a child as keenly as he would otherwise have done. The proposal to kill Druba is acceptable to the weak minded Nakshatra, it relieves him from the greater venture of taking the life of his brother and King. It suits Raghupati very well, indeed he has failed to rouse both the General and Nakshatra against the King, and he does not want to send Jai Sing on the desperate venture. Next to killing Govinda, he will relish most making a sacrifice of a child Govinda loves as his son. It is when he has been baulked in this enterprise and when he has nothing else to fall back upon that he scatters discretion to the winds and deposes Jai Sing to kill King Govinda. This is his last throw of the dice, which swiftly leads to the tragic catastrophe and brings about a tremendous change in him. The change is sudden but it is inevitable, and the attempted murder of Druba is an important link in the chain of events leading to the conclusion of the play, which is not without its element of irony, for it is Raghupati's foster-child and not the King's whose blood is served before the Goddess.

## CHAPTER IX

### DRAMAS—DIRECT AND SYMBOLIST—II

#### I

The simplest meaning of a symbol, as given by the O E D, is that it is something that stands for, represents or denotes something else. Thus understood, symbolism as Gordon Craig points out, is at the root not only of art but also of life, and consciously or unconsciously we employ symbols in our daily activities. The letters of the alphabet are symbols and so are the numerals, and science, as it advances to discover intricate laws, begins to rely increasingly on the use of symbols. As Gordon Craig further points out, not only do poets and painters constantly use symbols, but music becomes intelligible only through the employment of them. All forms of salutation and leave-taking are symbolic and the last act of affection rendered to the dead is to erect a symbol over them.

Although we are using symbols every moment of our lives, we do so mostly with the unconsciousness of Moliere's M Jourdain who talked prose for forty years without being aware of it. The symbol becomes important on its own account, and we forget that it stands for or represents something else. Thus when we exchange coins in our business transactions or courtesies in our daily affairs, the symbols become so real that out of habit or mental lethargy we lose sight of the inner meaning behind the symbols. Even when we deal with such obviously symbolical things as the King's Crown or the Pope's tiara or the national flag, we forget that the Crown and the tiara and the flag derive importance only from the ideas they represent. The religious devotee who protests against the desecration of his image or his place of worship does not consider how far his religion has suffered on account of the sacrilege. By long associa-

tion the visible object has acquired a sacredness of its own and when he fights or feels for it, he forgets the idea behind the image. It is the material object and not the immaterial idea it stands for that is present before consciousness.

It is the duty of the poet and the dramatist to make readers and spectators aware of the hidden significance behind external symbols. Of all forms of art the drama is particularly adapted to symbolist treatment, because it makes use of visible action; the actors and the stage first represent persons and places in a play and then the artist's sense of values. Art is a personal creation and that is why the artist tries to abjure conventional symbols in which *it is difficult to project the invisible idea behind the visible object* and creates new symbols that are adapted to the expression of the peculiar meaning he wants to express. Thus when Yeats writes a drama of Irish nationalism, he does not adopt the image of the flag but of Cathleen ní Houlihan, the mysterious old woman whose call is irresistible for Irishmen. In the method by which the artist conveys his deeper meaning, he makes some use of conventional relations but relies more on vague suggestions, hints and echoes by means of which concrete objects project what is otherwise incommunicable. Even when conventional associations are utilized, they are made part of a significance which is the artist's own creation. In *Hedda Gabler*, there is constant reference to Eilert Lovborg with vine-leaves in his hair. Convention gives to vine-leaves an association of wildness, Bacchanalian revelry; Ibsen does not reject this meaning altogether, but employs it to suggest a more delicate significance. These vine-leaves in Eilert's hair stand for that emotional richness, intensity, courage and unconventionality from which the worldly-minded and snobbish Hedda Tesman has shut herself out for ever. This region of emotional fervour, imaginative and intellectual idealism and moral boldness appears to her in glimpses; it is not as real to her as it is to Eilert himself and to Thea. The fugitive sparks she catches of it are too delicate to be

given a solid shape, these sparks which cannot be expressed in the same way in which an idea in an ordinary novel or drama is expressed are suggested through a symbol, through the vine-leaves which she imagines as decorating Eilert's hair. The symbols employed by an artist are definite and concrete, but they are made to suggest by indirect hints much more than they directly express. Adopting a well known image in Sanskrit poetics, we may say that the difference between the expressed meaning and the suggested meaning is like the difference between a beautiful woman's features and the general impression of loveliness produced by them. This impression of loveliness is projected by the features but it is *extrinsic to them*.

From what has been said above, two conclusions follow. First, in a symbolist work there are two planes of meaning, the surface meaning which is directly expressed and the overhanging meaning which is indirectly suggested. Secondly, the symbolical method is suitable only to the representation of what is esoteric, and the artist is justified in using symbols if only he can make his readers feel that he would not have been able to express his meaning effectively or compellingly without resorting to indirect suggestions. These two characteristics help us to distinguish between allegory and symbolism. In an allegory, the two planes of meaning run like parallel lines which do not intersect. Every character or incident or place has one kind of appropriateness in the surface plot and quite another when the hidden allegorical meaning is understood. *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be read very well as an arduous journey undertaken by a gentleman in the mundane world. On the allegorical plane, the journey is spiritual being a Christian's progress from earth to heaven. The Slough of Despond may mean a slough which the ordinary traveller has to get over, it may as appropriately be despondency which the faithful Christian will be subject to but must learn to overcome. When a reader thinks of the slough he need not think of despondency, and when he thinks of despon



dency, he need not think of the slough. Much the same thing may be said of medieval moralities like *The Castle of Perseverance* or *Mankind* in which the characters are personified abstractions with one significance in the rough and tumble of the story and another in the allegory in which they are denuded of all touches of human personality. It is a part of the excellence of these allegories that one set of meanings never impinges on the other. But the vine leaves in Eiler's hair cannot be taken out of their context in the human story in which they are connected with Hedda's fascination for him, the symbolical meaning being only a projection from the psychological.

It is necessary to guard at this stage against another possible misunderstanding. In all problem dramas, the heroes and the heroines are representatives of large types. Nora of emancipated women, Mrs Tanqueray of women with a past and Mrs Warren of prostitutes who have been driven by poverty to adopt their shameful profession. But in the strict sense of the term they should not be taken as symbols any more than characters in allegories. The reason is that when they are regarded as types, they cease to be individuals, here, too, as in allegories, one series of meanings does not cut across the other. The difference between the typical symbol and the suggestive symbol which may be called the symbol proper may best be understood if we compare the tarantella and the slamming of the door in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The tarantella, a rapid, whirling dance, represents the yet inexpressible yearnings of Nora's soul and prefigures the uncertain future to which she trusts her destiny. But Nora's slamming of the door when she leaves her husband does not suggest anything indefinable, it is only typical of modern women's abandoning the petted but cramped life which tradition has chalked out for the softer sex.

Not only is it necessary to distinguish between the suggestive and the allegorical or the typical symbol, but a word should be added on the nature of the relationship

between the two planes of meaning in a symbolist work of art. The surface meaning must be incomplete unless it is made to lead to the overhanging meaning, and the overhanging meaning must spring spontaneously out of the surface meaning. It is this impression of compellingness and adequacy that is lacking in the mere allegory in which the planes of meaning stand wide apart and the artist has to connect them by means of such obvious tricks as personification and the giving of tell tale names. The impression of adequacy which is so essential to symbolist art will be made clear if, leaving allegories out of consideration, we examine purely symbolist dramas like Maeterlinck's *The Sightless*, *The Interior* and *The Death of Tintagiles*. *The Sightless* introduces us to a group of blind men and blind women who talk but cannot see and a Priest, their leader, who sees but does not talk. The meaning of the human story is very thin, what is important is the hidden symbolical meaning of silent Destiny leading sightless men, but as the surface meaning does not lead naturally on to the esoteric, it seems that the former is superimposed on the latter. In *The Interior*, the human story gives us a tense drama of its own, which, being complete in itself, does not seem to require any supplementary meaning. In this drama the hidden significance seems to be a later accretion and not a part of the dramatist's creative activity. In *The Death of Tintagiles*, which, by the way, Maeterlinck himself regarded as his highest achievement, there is an impression of perfect adequacy between the surface meaning and the mystical meaning. The human story is about a sister's passionate but impotent love for a brother whom she cannot save, and Ygraine's absorbing devotion, pathetic entreaty, her self confidence and her despair are powerfully portrayed. But the reference to the mysterious queen who does not appear on the stage, the activity of her servants who silently steal the child, the talk about the other brothers who have been similarly disposed of, the helplessness of the sisters—all these suggest the dark

ways of Destiny whom man is powerless to thwart. These suggestions spring spontaneously out of the movement of the plot, and the activities of the characters, but the story, although effectively told, and the characters, although subtly drawn, are incomplete unless the human meaning is reinforced by the symbolical.

## II

Of Rabindranath's four symbolist dramas, *The Cycle of Spring* and *Red Oleanders* are predominantly allegorical while the other two—*The Post Office* and *The King of the Dark Chamber*—belong to the genre of the symbolist drama proper. In *The Cycle of Spring*, Rabindranath tilts repeatedly at the unpoetical reader's insistence on finding out the exact meaning of a work of art, but it is significant that consciously or unconsciously the poet is at great pains to explain the inner meaning of his fantasia. Indeed, one of the defects of this drama is the poet's elaboration of the allegorical meaning of his plot which cannot suggest its hidden significance evocatively. The story covers the adventures of some young men guided by a Leader and one Chandra, in search of the Old Man, the true original Old Man, whose one business is to kidnap men. When we remember that the purpose of the play is to revive confidence in a King who has been frightened by the appearance of two grey hairs in his head, it requires little ingenuity to understand that the mysterious Old Man represents Death whom Youth is out to take captive. Lest the allegorical significance of the young men may not be easily discernible, they are given a Leader who is explained as the "guiding impulse" in their life and the Leader is assisted by one Chandra who is represented as the personification of Love. The Leader goes inside the Old Man's cave and finds that he lives only in imagination. It is the young men alone who really exist, and it is their Leader who, when seen from behind, appears to be old. When

viewed in relation to nature, the Old Man is Winter which brings death to natural beauties, but as these are renewed in Spring, even in nature the decay that is brought about in Winter is more apparent than real. As the poet in the Introduction himself explains, "In the play of the seasons each year, the mask of the Old Man, Winter is pulled off, and the form of Spring is revealed in all its beauty. Thus we see that the old is ever new. The play of Spring in nature is the counterpart of the play of Youth in our lives."

From the above explanation given by Rabindranath himself it will be quite clear that this drama, except in one brilliant patch to be noticed below, is allegorical rather than symbolical. There is nothing in the drama which plays its part in the human context and projects a hidden meaning, there are two planes of meaning which fit into each other but do not intersect. Thompson quotes Jiten dralal Banerjee as saying, "the conception is thin, and the execution just tolerable," a criticism with which Thompson is in substantial agreement. This criticism is inapplicable to the songs in which the regenerative powers of Nature are portrayed through a series of exquisitely beautiful symbols. All the birds, all the flowers, the whole world of vegetation seem to be dead in winter, but suddenly the South Wind comes, nobody knows from where and "tingles life" into them, and it is revealed that Nature carries the jewels of youth hidden in her grey rags. The conception is simple but not thin, because it is worked through the extraordinarily varied activities of Nature which destroys beauties only to recreate them.

The human drama, however, is not so good as the lyrical interludes, for the Old Man is shown to be non-existent, and thus the adventures of the young men and the anxious expectancy of the Minstrel prove to be a mountain of labour that produces—nothing. Rabindranath's presentation of death is one-sided. It is doubtful if there is any touch of comedy or bathos in death which is the most

poignantly terrible experience in life. It may be said that the view propounded in *The Cycle of Spring* is that the terrors of Death—the gaping mouth and the bodiless head of the dragon—are illusions, but quoting Rabindranath, we may retort that even illusion is true as illusion, and the horrors of death are just as real or as unreal as the beauty of flowers or the sweetness of bird songs.

An analogous criticism may be made of the prologue which Thompson judges a little too harshly. The conception of a King thinking of renunciation at the advent of old age and being then brought back by a poet to a richer understanding of life's duties and joys is happy, and the poet's ideas, arguments and images are, indeed, very moving, but Srutibhusan, who represents the opposite point of view, is so absurdly ludicrous and his avarice so palpable that it is difficult to see how the King fails to see what cannot deceive the Vizier or any one else. This makes the conflict in the King's mind look contemptible. It was extremely undramatic of the author to have loaded the scales so heavily against deliverance through renunciation. It may be said that there are very uncomplimentary remarks about poets, too, who are referred to as disporting themselves by jumping about on branches of the Garden of Poesy, but the poet of this play, who wins the King back to his love for life and work, does not answer this description, and for the sake of dramatic effectiveness, Srutibhusan should have been made an equally magnificent character.

The best thing in the drama is the portrait of the blind Minstrel who sees and hears with his whole body. He is different from the other characters, being blind he cannot take part in the expedition of the young men and stands apart, but he has mystical insight into the heart of reality. The distinctiveness of his character is shown not merely through his songs and speeches which are significant enough but also through his actions and the influence he quietly spreads over his associates with whom he has very little in common. When the sighted young men are terror

stricken and doubtful about their mission, he is calm and confident, because he alone knows the truth, he can both see and hear the track that is hidden from them. The young men do not at first believe him, they do not like him, they consider his looks ominous, but they cannot dismiss him, for his presence inspires them with courage and although they have no insight of their own, they can get glimpses of the truth by simply looking at him. They are afraid to disturb him, for mysterious messages strike his forehead, he makes suggestive movements of his body, and even when it is night for others morning seems to dawn for the blind man. When the Leader is coming back, or in other words, the hidden meaning of the myth about the Old Man begins to be revealed, he can see the Leader before Chandra himself. When the Leader returns and begins to narrate his experiences and all mystery is gone, the blind Minstrel has nothing else to do, and he seems to have retired unperceived.

*Red Oleanders* is frankly allegorical. As Rabindranath found that many of his Western readers failed correctly to appraise its significance he himself gave an elaborate explanation of its allegorical meaning in a letter in *The Manchester Guardian*, in course of which he said, "There was a time when, in the human world, most of our important dealings with our fellow beings were personal dealings, and the professional element in society was never hugely disproportionate to the normal constitution of its life."

To-day another factor has made itself immensely evident in shaping and guiding human destiny. It is the spirit of organization which is not social in character, but utilitarian.

I am not competent to say how Europe feels about this phenomenon produced by her science.

The view that we can get of her, in our mutual dealings is that of a titanic power with an endless curiosity to analyse and know but without sympathy to understand, with numberless arms to coerce and acquire, but no serenity of soul to realize and enjoy. It should cause no surprise

to anybody if a poet, belonging to a continent swallowed by the menacing shadow of Europe, gives a prominent place among the *dramatis personae* to an apparition which now so powerfully occupies the imagination of a vast world, consisting of non-Western peoples. It is not an individual doom; and therefore it should never be compared to characters like Lady Macbeth by those who wish to find a literary precedent."

The conception of a titanic King living in an underworld behind a net-work and controlling material forces and human destinies is, indeed, a mighty one, and it is expressed through innumerable touches which make the apparition impressive. It is certainly true that he is not an individual, that his physiognomy is blurred through an intricate network, but he is made distinctive in a hundred ways, through the terror he inspires in others and the influence he exercises on them. The Governor and the Deputy Governor, the Professor and the spiritual teacher, Bishu and Kishor, Phagulal and Chandra, Gajju and Kanku—they are all different from one another, but over all of them spreads like a miasma the blighting power of the King. The apparition of the King becomes real not only through his terrible strength but also through his weakness. He has to exercise power over others, but feels an emptiness within himself. That is why he is tired, very tired and has to join the flag-worship to revive his drooping spirit. When he meets Nandini who is in his world but not of it, he is extraordinarily curious about her, but he is also afraid of her. He asks her to go away from him, but calls her back, because he is fascinated by the beauty of her eyes, of her lips and of her black hair.

The portrait of the King is undoubtedly very grand, but what is the drama about? Many critics feel that it is weak in plot construction and characterization. *The Scotsman* points out in course of a review that "the characters in *Red Oleanders* come on and go off the stage without doing anything that forms a plot with exposition,

development, and denouement' *The Times Literary Supplement* says "Many of the lofty utterances of Nandini and the voice are so devoid of meaning that one is constantly aware of the emptiness of such symbols as the tassel of Oleanders, the network in front of the palace, and the caves of Yaksha town' Whether one agrees with Rabindranath or not and whether the portraiture of Nandini is dramatically a success need not be discussed first. What is important to note is that the meaning is simple enough and has been elaborately represented. It is easy to see that the network stands for the intricate barrier by means of which the industrial organization of men's professionalism screens personal relationships. The barrier is built partly by science, partly by racial prejudice and partly by power. The dramatist does not go into these details for they are unnecessary, it is enough for the purpose of the play that the barrier is there, and it is for this barrier that the King cannot enter into the life of his people and the people cannot enter into his. The caves of Yaksha town where nuggets of gold are being made and gathered stand obviously for the world of modern industrialism, it is an underworld, because though money is made here in plenty, it is cut off from the open air of love, freedom and joy which is symbolized quite clearly by the tassel of red oleanders. Flowers belong to the upper world, their emotional associations are unmistakable, and red, we all know, is the colour of love and liberty.

It is not true that *Red Oleanders* is without a plot comprising exposition, development and denouement. The central theme is the killing of Ranjan and the change that this incident and Nandini's influence bring about in the life of the King who with Nandini's help begins fighting against himself. Rabindranath explains the significance of the action in his own way. She (Nandini) is not an abstraction, but is pursued by an abstraction like one tormented by a ghost. And this is the drama. To say that the drama has a plot and that in the heroine the dramatist



wants to delineate a real woman is not, however, to admit that the movement of the plot is flawless or that the heroine is a successful portrait. Taking Nandini first, we find that although she is drawn as a real woman who cannot accept the abnormal atmosphere of the Yaksha town, not much is said of the positive side of her life as a human being. The King has closed the way out from the underworld and he has paralysed the will to go out. Nandini, who is full of the spirit of freedom, awakens the will to go out and is thus the bearer of the message of reality in the abnormal world created by the King. But whatever may be the intention of the dramatist be, in the play she is more a critic of the King than a woman with a personality of her own. On the positive side of her character, emphasis is laid only on her love for Ranjan, but Ranjan is too shadowy to be taken either as a definite symbol or as a live human being. The killing of Ranjan marks the crisis of the play, but the conspiracy which leads to it is described too indistinctly and too much at second hand to be regarded as a tense dramatic action, and it is difficult to see what symbolical suggestion it is intended to convey. It seems that the hidden meaning—whatever that meaning may be—has clouded the human drama of love and death. There is a good deal of confusion about many other characters, too. It is seen that most of the men in Yaksha town have been inspired by Nandini, the Deputy Governor not excepted, but it is not clear why they fail to break away from their hell. Again, if so many of them have been infected by her, we do not see what is the special offence of Bishu and Kishor nor do we know what exactly happens to them. Yet another defect is that some of the satires such as that of Kenaram Gosain are too broad, and indeed, the exposition of the play is so long that the other parts are hurried through. In spite of these defects, *Red Oleanders* is a striking drama principally because of the portrait of the King who is, indeed, a fitting symbol of the power, greed and heartlessness of modern industrialism.

## III

The King in *Red Oleanders* is only a voice in the earlier part, but he comes out as a man in its later stages. But the King in *The King of the Dark Chamber* is a more complex figure, being part of a detailed allegory in which may be traced the influence of Vaishnava ideology. The unseen King is God who, like a husband, wooes the human soul represented by Queen Sudarshana, and the place of meeting is a dark chamber which seems to stand for the inner consciousness where man may be united to God. One of the leading ideas in Rabindranath's philosophy is that salvation is not to be won in the lonely corners of the soul only but that it will be completed in the wide universe, for God is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. That is why at the end of the drama when the Queen has been truly united to her King or in other words when the human soul has realized God within itself, the King flings open the doors of the dark room and Sudarshana is bidden to come with him outside—into the light. The King is dark, his appearance repulsive, because God is formless and the human eye cannot stand the presence of the formless Sensuous beauty, which divorced from spirituality is an imposture, is represented by the pretender Suvarna. It is part of the purgation through which the human soul has to pass that at first it prefers the specious beauty of sense to the magnificent attraction of the formless. The King of Kanchi, who makes use of Suvarna is no pretender, he stands for the positivistic attitude which never takes the unseen into account till it has become seen. That is why although Suvarna vanishes into nothingness Kanchi is honoured by the Lord and saved.

The above analysis, long as it is may be pushed further, and for most of the incidents a suitable allegorical interpretation may be offered. But the excellence of the drama consists not so much in the facility with which two

parallel sets of meaning may be brought out as in the manner in which the symbols of the human story project a mystical significance. Not only are the symbols, magnificently-conceived but one plane of meaning passes very easily into and is, indeed, completed in, the other. One or two examples will reveal the artistic craftsmanship by means of which the symbols are made to acquire their suggestive power. When Sudarshana first meets the King, he expresses that rapturous delight in her which a lover may feel in his sweetheart, and it is natural that in such a mood he will exaggerate her beauty ; indeed, he would be less than a lover if he did not do so. But when the King says, "I see that the darkness of the infinite heavens, whirled into life and being by the power of my love, has drawn the light of a myriad stars into itself and incarnated itself in a form of flesh and blood. And in that form what aeons of thought and striving, untold yearnings of limitless skies, the countless gifts of unnumbered seasons!", do we listen to a human lover enlarging on the beauty of a human sweetheart, or to the ecstasy of God contemplating the supreme experiment of His creative energy? The fire which foils the King of Kanchi's first plan and leads to his second is yet another illustration of symbolist art. The fire is set by the King of Kanchi, and it is well known that when once a fire has started, it spreads from place to place. The King of Kanchi wanted to set fire only to that part of the garden which is near the palace so that Sudarshana might come out to be kidnapped by him. But the quickness with which it spreads from one spot to another completely upsets his plans, and he is at a loss to find the way out of the garden and save his life. The way in which Kanchi is non-plussed makes us wonder if this rapidity in the movement of the fire is not due to the agency of a higher power, for it seems that the King of the Dark Chamber has intervened not only to frustrate Kanchi's plans but also to give his Queen the first glimpses of his own terrific appearance. Even before the fire has been seen by the men and the

animals, they instinctively fly away from the garden. Naturalists point out that animals possess instinctive insight in such emergencies, but how can the men know, and who has endowed the animals with this instinct? This insight of the animals and the humble people in the garden suggests the operation of a superior power, it is the King who calls them away from the garden before any harm may come to them from the fire. As has been pointed out above, many other examples may be given in illustration of symbolist technique. While slaving in her father's house, Sudarshana hears sweet music coming from a deep thicket below her window. She tries to find out the musician, but she can see nothing distinctly. Surangama pretends to dismiss the phenomenon by airily suggesting that there is nothing impossible in the idea that somebody indulges his taste for music there, but it seems to be the same music that came floating out of the blank darkness when in the evening Sudarshana waited in the past for a meeting with her King in the lampless chamber. It is the same music that the intruding Kings hear just before punishment overtakes them, thus illustrating the poet's assertion in *Fruit Gathering*—36, that God's judgment seat is in the flower garden and in the bird's notes in spring time and that his forgiveness bursts in storms, throwing miscreants down scattering their thefts in the dust. One remarkable feature of the Kingdom of which Sudarshana is the Queen is that although the King is unseen, there is perfect order in it, which has led some critics to imagine Rabindranath as a champion of republicanism. The poet's meaning, which is more mystical than political, seems to be that although love for order and harmony is an innate human principle, it is noteworthy that all men should accept a discipline that seems at first sight to be against everyone's self interest. It is because everyone sacrifices his desire for immediate gain out of consideration for the needs of others that harmony can prevail. This love for discipline which is both an indwelling instinct and an external necessity is most appro

priately expressed through the symbol of the unseen King who allows his subjects complete freedom but protects them from anarchy and chaos

Queen Sudarshana, too, is a unique creation. She has all the passionate longings of a woman in love, all the doubts, ecstasies, fatuities and vanities of an ordinary mortal, and in the end, her pride is gone, her soul is purged and she knows her King. There seems, indeed, to be no difference between her and a woman of the earth. But her passion is more intense than the normal woman's passion, her vanity more foolish, her mistakes more enormous, and the process of purgation she is made to pass through, though not humanly improbable, is not such as the daughters of *Eve* are called on to face in their daily lives. This difference in degree is so marked that Sudarshana is at the same time a woman in love and a symbol of the human soul yearning to transcend earthly limitations and meet God. Surangama is a beautiful pendent to Sudarshana, she has everything that Sudarshana lacks. She is unnecessary to the plot, but she helps to enrich the play's significance.

Although *The King of the Dark Chamber* is a remarkable achievement as symbolist drama, there is one glaring flaw to which attention must be drawn. When the Kings have gathered in an assembly and Sudarshana is to be brought to make her choice amongst them, suddenly Grandfather appears as a soldier and the unseen King fights his enemies with the help of an army. There is a suggestion that the Kings of Avanti, Kosala and other kingdoms were routed because of their mutual mistrust and lack of confidence, but such a suggestion would be inapplicable to the redoubtable King of Kanchi. Here the symbolist imagination flags and Kanchi is represented as having put up a stout fight and being then fixed in the chest by a deadly missile. This incident is reported at secondhand, as it stands it is too crudely realistic to project a symbolic meaning. Who is it that threw the deadly missile? Is it the King or the Grandfather? Such an act would be unbecom-

the King who is too elusively spiritual to make a thundering row over his progress, through the country ' If it is the Grandfather, all we can say is that there is nothing in the earlier part of the play that prepares us for such a transformation nor is there anything in his subsequent activities that may justify it The conclusion is irresistible, therefore, that in this important section of the drama the symbolist suggestion, whatever that may be, is swamped in the surface meaning

*The Post Office*, which has been successfully presented in India and in many countries of Europe, is the most popular of all Tagore's plays, and it is possibly the best of them all It contains elements of a tense human drama a moving fairy tale and a deeply suggestive spiritual symbol Amal is a sick child in the protection of Madhab who dotes on him But there is a touch of elusiveness about his relationship with Madhab who is not his father and has only adopted him In the most tense moment of his life Amal does not think of Madhab but hears voices from far away and feels that 'his mother and father are sitting by his pillow and speaking to him Madhab, who is so anxious to preserve Amal's life, is haunted by a fear that the child is a stranger whom he will not be able to save The doctor thinks, as village quacks very often do, that the outer wind the autumn sun and the damp are harmful to the little patient Madhab, who is ignorant, trusts to the doctor and confines Amal within a small room from the window of which Amal looks at the outer world and is fascinated by the stream of life he sees in the street—labourers going out in search of jobs, the dairyman with his curd the watchman with his ringing of bells and children at play Not only is he fascinated by them but he fascinates them all One of the most original and beautiful things in this drama is the way in which the poet discovers through Amal the inner romance in the humdrum activities of life It is natural that Amal, who is confined within a small room

in the daily round of the ordinary man's work, should find something wonderful in all that stirs abroad. The suggestion is made unobtrusively but irresistibly that if only the film of familiarity were removed from our daily life, even the most prosaic things might reveal a soul of poetry in them. Not only does Amal discover romance in the daily activities of the people about him but he also infects them with his own romantic attitude. The Dairyman sees a new vision of his own faraway village under big trees on the Shamli river at the Punch-mura hills, of cattle grazing and women drawing water and carrying it on their heads. And it is the prosy watchman who invents the possibility of a letter coming to Amal from the King and of the King's Post Office being set near Amal's window for this purpose. Amal's sensitive imagination catches fire, and he sees visions of the King's postman coming down the hill-side alone, a lantern in his left hand and on his back a bag of letters, climbing down for ever so long, for days and nights, and of his taking to the footpath on the bank where at the foot of the mountain the waterfall becomes a stream.

In the Preface to *The Post Office* W. B. Yeats lays emphasis on deliverance as the theme of this play, the deliverance which the child discovers in death, which always comes at the moment when the "I" seeking no longer for gains that cannot be "assimilated with its spirit", is able to say, "All my work is thine". Although *The Post Office* ends in death and the State Physician brings the message of deliverance, yet a good deal of the drama is about the earth also, about the joys which Amal wants to find by freeing himself from the limitations imposed by his uncle. Amal wants to go about and see everything that there is not only in the open street before him but also in what lies in regions beyond his immediate gaze. His uncle thinks that the hill stands upright as a barrier to prevent men crossing over, but to Amal the hill is only the raised arm of the dumb earth, beckoning men to go into far-off regions. The Post Office is the link

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in the daily round of the ordinary man's work, should find something wonderful in all that stirs abroad. The suggestion is made unobtrusively but irresistibly that if only the film of familiarity were removed from our daily life, even the most prosaic things might reveal a soul of poetry in them. Not only does Amal discover romance in the daily activities of the people about him but he also infects them with his own romantic attitude. The Dairyman sees a new vision of his own faraway village under big trees on the Shamli river at the Punch mura hills, of cattle grazing and women drawing water and carrying it on their heads. And it is the prosy watchman who invents the possibility of a letter coming to Amal from the King and of the King's Post Office being set near Amal's window for this purpose. Amal's sensitive imagination catches fire, and he sees visions of the King's postman coming down the hill side alone, a lantern in his left hand and on his back a bag of letters climbing down for ever so long, for days and nights, and of his taking to the footpath on the bank where at the foot of the mountain the waterfall becomes a stream.

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connecting Amal with these far off regions which stretch beyond the river and the mountain and the narrow lane into the open meadow where the crickets chirp and where there is not a single man to be seen, where only the snipe wag their tails and poke at the mud with their bills.

It is because of Amal's love for the far away that this simple drama links itself to the fairy story, and we find an appropriate place in it for the Gaffer who does not follow any useful calling and roams about from place to place. He tells Amal tales of the Isle of Parrots where there are no men and where the parrots neither speak nor walk but simply sing and fly. And from Amal the Gaffer learns a new fairy story, of the Postman trudging from place to place and of the Dairyman's niece who will be Amal's bride, milking cows and telling tales of Champa and her six brothers. Every fairy story must have a King in the offing and the King, who has set a new Post Office before Amal's window and sends him his State Physician, is no intruder. The King's Physician brings the message of emancipation through death and thus completes the symbolical meaning of the play, but the King is necessary also to round off the fairy tale.

*The Post Office* is impeccable in construction, and the message it conveys springs spontaneously out of the plot of the human story. Yet it may be of interest to the reader to know the interpretation which Rabindranath himself gave to C. F. Andrews.

"Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road—he seeks freedom from the comfortable enclosure of habits sanctioned by the prudent and from walls of rigid opinion built for him by the respectable. But Madhab, the worldly wise, considers his restlessness to be the sign of a fatal malady, and his adviser, the physician, the custodian of conventional platitudes—with his quotations from prescribed text books full of maxims—gravely nods his head and says that freedom is unsafe and

every care should be taken to keep the sick man within walls. And so the precaution is taken.

"But there is the Post Office in front of his window, and Amal waits for the King's letter to come to him direct from the King, bringing to him the message of emancipation. At last the closed gate is opened by the King's own physician, and that which is 'death' to the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds brings him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom" (*Letters To A Friend*)

#### IV

A word need be said in conclusion about Rabindranath's position as a dramatist. Good as some of his dramas are, his own countrymen rate them below his poems and consider him a great lyric poet who has also produced some attractive plays. Thompson, although he has some hard things to say about many of the plays, is inclined to give high value to his achievement as a dramatist and regrets that he did not allow his dramatic genius to have full development. Rabindranath himself thought that "in India drama cannot attain that excellence of which we find evidence in Europe. In replying to a correspondent he said that drama requires an amount of directness in the exhibition of emotions, of which the oriental mind fights shy.

Nothing is more risky than to draw a general indictment against nations, and there is Kalidasa's example to show that great drama can be written in India. But it may be said that the general opinion of Rabindranath's countrymen about his dramas is correct. Some of the dramas are refreshingly original, and *The Post Office* is perfect in its own way; but he is not a great dramatist. First of all, although there is no lack of sparkling wit in his writings, he has not that penetrating sense of humour which enables a dramatist to understand characters of different temperaments and to identify himself equally with all of them. Raghupati and Kemankar bear testimony to the

largeness of Rabindranath's sympathies, but they are magnificent personifications of an idea rather than full length portraits. And we look in vain in Rabindranath's dramas for characters like Feste and Touchstone. Secondly, in delineating character Rabindranath draws grand outlines rather than go into subtle shades. There is no character resembling Hamlet, Iago or Cleopatra, and the contrast he draws between Chandrasen and Rebati is only a faint imitation of the distinction between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Rabindranath's symbolic dramas are better than his experiments in the field of direct dramatic representation. But in both these groups there is, except in occasional scenes or episodes, a lack of dramatic tenseness, adopting Thompson's remarks in another context, we may say that they often fail in grip. They rarely reach that stage of dramatic excitement which is the characteristic feature of the dramas, say, of Ibsen and Strindberg. Even in the symbolist dramas he rarely makes use of natural or environmental symbols in the manner of Maeterlinck who relies for so much of his appeal on palaces, towers, rivers and forests which are charged with mystical suggestiveness. His characters too have not that strange unconsciousness or that mysterious insight and strength which we find in different degrees in Melisanda, Alladine and Ygraine, who can all see behind the veil. But what is lost in tenseness or grip is partly compensated for in naturalness and simplicity. In Rabindranath's symbolical dramas we are rarely cut off—even in the underworld of the Yaksha town—from the beauties of the open air, and if a hidden truth reveals itself, it does so not through abnormal instincts and emotions but through the normal yearning of a woman for union with her lord or of a child for the world stretching beyond his window. Laurence Alma Tadema says that an eminent critic once called Maeterlinck a hopeless mental cripple. Surely no reader of *The King Of the Dark Chamber* or *The Post Office* can say this of Tagore.

## CHAPTER X

### SHORT STORIES

#### I

The short story, like the novel, is a story told in prose; it may, therefore, seem to be a brief edition of the novel. But both in substance and in technique the long novel and the short story are widely divergent. Just because the short story covers only a few pages, it can find no room for complex analysis of character, lengthy elaboration of plot or detailed commentary on life. Its beginning is very near its conclusion. That is why it selects only such incidents or such traits of character as may reveal some undiscovered, unsuspected aspect of life. Its chief feature is the impression of abruptness and surprise it produces. Yet another characteristic is what Miss Elizabeth Bowen, herself a story-teller, calls "tautness". It does not sprawl; it concentrates all its interest on a single point. It is no wonder, therefore, that the story-teller makes use chiefly of irony and anti-climax, the end of the story bringing out some unexpected facet of reality. It may, indeed, be said that the long novel with its analyses, descriptions and commentaries show the logic of life; but the short story with its emphasis on surprise throws light on the illogicality which, too, is a large part of life.

In the short stories of Rabindranath Tagore there are not a few in which the point of interest is a surprising turn in the tide of events. Kantichandra is fascinated by a beautiful girl who seems to respond to the name of "Sudha". He makes a proposal of marriage before the master of the house in which he meets the girl, and he has, indeed, a daughter of the name of Sudha. He celebrates the marriage without further inquiry and is painfully surprised to find

that his newly wedded bride is not the girl by whom he was enchanted. But he has a greater surprise in store for him when he comes to know that the girl, who startled him by her beauty, is dumb, deaf and idiotic. She did not really respond to the name 'Sudha', being a halfwit, she accidentally nodded her head when this name was called. Surprise leads on to surprise, and what might have been a curse becomes a blessing (*The Auspicious Vision*)

Stories like the above, good as they are, give an imperfect idea of Rabindranath's genius as a story teller. He is above everything else, a lyric poet, one of the greatest in the world, and his stories bear the impress of his lyrical, mystical genius. Indeed, in his best stories Rabindranath seems to create a new literary genre in which the art of the lyric poem and that of the short story are united. They combine the element of surprise, so essential to the short story, with the rich emotionalism which is the soul of the lyric. In describing his experience in the Great Illumination, which marked the turning point in his life, Rabindranath says that he seemed to realize then for the first time that things which, on a surface view, appear to be detached from one another are really united by an inner harmony. This illumination, therefore, not only gave him an idea of the unity of life but also enabled him to see behind the veil, to penetrate the surface into the deeper reality lying hidden from view. He himself likens this experience to the lifting of a mist, the removing of a screen. It is the perception of this deeper reality in various fields of life, which is the keynote of Rabindranath's short stories. Life seems to be a humdrum affair, it just creaks its way on. Rabindranath takes small incidents in social and domestic life—sometimes it is merely a place or a forgotten incident in history—and shows what rich emotional potentialities lie concealed behind their commonplaceness. He finds rifts in the apparently unbroken surface of life and loads them with ore. The revelation at the end of a story comes so unobtrusively and yet so emphatically that it seems, indeed, that the ore was already there.

he just discovers it and holds it before the gaze of his readers.

## II

In some stories unlooked for emotional possibilities are explored in the drab, prosaic *milieu* of domestic life which is controlled by considerations of practical utility and in which tradition and self-interest seem to have fixed, for all time, the channels along which love is to flow. A stranger finds himself billeted as a postmaster in a village in a remote corner in Bengal. He is a bachelor and is ill-paid. He cannot set up a costly establishment and maintain his own people in the village where he is posted. He therefore cooks his own food in a thatched hut in which he lives, and employs Ratan, a low-caste orphan girl, to give him assistance. There is little room for the development of any emotional relationship unless we imagine the postmaster as falling in love with the servant-girl. Such a conception would, indeed, be very cheap, but Rabindranath's portraiture of the postmaster and the girl is full of freshness and subtlety. The postmaster, who hails from Calcutta, feels very lonely in the far-away village (in North Bengal) in which he has no relations and friends, and in which he hardly ever gets a man to talk to. It is the rainy season, and his heart becomes wistful; he wants just someone whom he may call his own and with whom he can exchange confidences. In the absence of a nearer companion, he talks to the servant-girl about his own people and proceeds to teach her the alphabet. This one touch of nature wins the heart of Ratan, a poor orphan who has nobody to feel warmly for her. She waits in eager expectancy for the postmaster's call and works assiduously at her lessons not so much because she is interested in them as because this is one of the avenues by means of which she can come near the postmaster. Here is an undefined and indefinable relationship that is subtler than the feeling which we ordinarily

call love. A small helpless girl has found someone who, she feels, cares for her and to whom she wants to belong without being sure in what exact way she may become connected with this exile from Calcutta. "Anything to thee"—that is the attitude of the orphan girl who is too immature to understand the mazy ways of life. The postmaster leaves the place for good, is anxious to make arrangements for the girl and even offers her in charity a large slice of what ready money he has. The girl yearns for a much warmer relationship than mere charity and a suitable employment. What exactly this warmer relationship may be she does not clearly know, and when she is left disconsolate, her sorrowing face seems to represent the 'great unspoken pervading grief of Mother Earth herself. What Rabindranath reveals in this casual acquaintance of a village postmaster is the primeval emotional yearning of human nature which is too deep and *too mysterious to fit into the coarser arrangements of human society*.

The story of Nilkanta who is welcomed and then cast away supplies another example of maladjustment and wasted emotion. He belonged to a village theatrical troupe which generally recruits vagabonds and waifs who are ill fed, ill clothed and harshly treated. When by an accident Nilkanta finds a comfortable shelter with Kiran who receives him with interest and looks after him with exuberant affection, he is transported as it were into a new world where he finds not only good food and clothing to which he was unused but also a rich human relationship which was beyond his imagination. He never knew that there could be such a thing as a human being feeling in a human way for another human being and at this touch of tenderness from Kiran, he begins to develop a personality of his own, which he expresses in a strange but very characteristic manner. He entertains Kiran with the songs, dances and dramatic tit bits he learnt as a member of the theatrical party, but when he is asked to regale with these Kiran's husband Sharat and Sharat's brother Satish who have no



affection for him, he becomes silent. The discovery of warm emotional susceptibilities in the neglected waif of a village theatrical troupe is itself very striking, but Rabindranath's imaginative insight is more in evidence in the manner in which Nilkanta's wounded self-respect and yearning for affection are expressed in his vendetta against Satish. The poor waif does not understand that howsoever affectionate Kiran might be towards him, he has no place in her household in which Satish is a major figure and that there can be no competition between him and Satish. Neither do Kiran, Satish and Sharat enquire into the cause of his restlessness or even stop to consider if he can have any grievance at all. Even if Nilkanta could have explained in articulate language his jealousy about Satish, they would have laughed it away. That is why his wounded vanity and unsatisfied yearning make him think of injuring Satish, and this leads him to remove the thing Satish holds most dear. This is not theft, Kiran's affection has made a man of him and he would spurn the idea of stealing some one else's property. But this is the only weapon by means of which he can feed his grudge against Satish who, he imagines, has turned Kiran's affection away from him. It is in this way that Rabindranath traces the tortuous workings of the boy's heart which masks its thwarted yearning for affection behind a garb of jealousy, revengefulness and criminality. At every step the author is careful to show that what is expressed is less important than what lies behind.

• In *The Home Coming* and *The Elder Sister*, there is maladjustment caused by affection colliding with self-interest. In these two stories, too, Rabindranath reveals deep sensibilities in an unexpected place and shows how instinctive affection asserts itself in the midst of incongruous situations. Phatik Chakravorti is a village lad of fourteen or fifteen, undistinguished in every way, but his exile in Calcutta and the harsh treatment meted out by an unsympathetic aunt help to awaken the deeper emotions which lay dormant in this neglected urchin. Indeed, so deep is

the agony Phatik feels that he becomes the type of all boys of his age who acquire a sensitiveness to emotion but are generally passed over with indifference or even condemned to ill treatment. Phatik's misery is rendered more acute because he is an exile from his village, and in the arid surroundings of Calcutta he misses not only his human mother but also great Nature who embraced him with a mother's warmth in the glorious meadows, the broad river banks and the narrow brook of his village. A kind of physical love like that of animals—a longing to be in the presence of the one who is beloved, an inexpressible wistfulness during absence, a silent cry of the inmost heart for the mother, like the lowing of a calf in the twilight,—this love, which was almost an animal instinct agitated the shy, nervous, lean uncouth and ugly boy." It is like the unspoken love of mother Earth, it is the primal instinct with which she endows her children. It is worth noting that this love of which the boy would have remained unconscious in his village home is awakened by the cramping surroundings of Calcutta and the ill treatment he receives from his aunt.

*The Elder Sister*, which records the gradual separation coming in between a husband and a wife, makes use of the technique of the long novel, and the comments of neighbour Tara seem to serve the purpose of a prose chorus. But it is an excellent short story, for in it there are both concentration and surprise, the point of the story consisting in the way in which unexpectedly but inevitably the sympathy and love aroused for an orphan brother cuts across the dictates of duty, habit and self interest. One interesting feature of the story is the economy by means of which, through a few telling strokes, the author portrays this conflict between affection and a sense of justice on the one hand and the hostile forces of self interest and conventional alliance on the other.

*The Babus of Nayanjore* and *My Lord, the Baby* deal with phases of domestic and social life but in them there

is no maladjustment such as there is in the stories discussed above. These two stories show in what a tortuous way the human heart moves, especially when it is possessed by a deep emotion. Kailash Babu had outlived all the pomp and glory of an ancient zamindar, retaining little but the endless witchery of a name. But it is this name that captured his imagination and claimed his loyalty. That is why he who was otherwise good hearted and impeccable would go on weaving impossible yarns about himself and his family with the creative fertility of an artist and he had also an artist's faith in the reality of his own fancies. The old man was a highly attractive person, his yarns did not hurt any one and they deceived none but himself. There was a touch of pathos, too, because he had little but this pardonable vanity to support him in the hard struggle for existence. The sequel of the *The Babus of Nayanjore* is remarkable in more ways than one. The narrator of the story invents the episode of the Lieutenant Governor in order to befool the old man but his triumph is also his defeat, and the defeat helps to round off the tale in a very pleasant manner. The double role played by the simple girl Kusum who seemed to be otherwise undistinguished reveals the rich store of human emotion which, under many guises, sustains and sweetens life. The profound affection which the old man entertains for his orphan grand-daughter is brought out when, in the height of his joy at her good fortune, he, for the first and last time in his life, admits that he is poor, that the proposal of marriage made by the narrator is for him a boon, thus showing that the deepest emotions of the heart are more powerful than all external attachments, howsoever strong. In the last stage of the story all the characters reveal themselves in an unexpected light—Kusum as well as her grandfather and the narrator who came to mock and stays to love.

In *My Lord, the Baby*, there is a strange picture of affection which is stronger than even parental love. Rai charan is an uneducated and half idiotic servant who makes

too much of his master's baby, and on account of his doting affection he looks very much like a buffoon. When partly through his own foolishness the child is drowned, he is dazed, and because he thinks that he is responsible for this mishap, he is too overwhelmed to give any satisfactory answer to the questions put to him by the baby's parents. The strange love he bore for the baby for whose death he is responsible undergoes a stranger transformation which however, is quite in keeping with his intellectual limitations, his fervid attachment to the boy and the overwhelming experience of the boy's death. He becomes so wild, indeed, that when a son is born to him, he first of all thinks in his own demented way that this child is a usurper, and then when the son displays the same characteristics as his master's child, as all children must do, the simple, crazy old man persuades himself that it is his own master's lost baby that has returned to his arms, and he dedicates his life to the rearing up of this boy as his old lord the baby parental affection being thus subordinated to the fascination which the old child exercised on him. It is a wonderful psychological study, showing how strangely the mind of a simple, ignorant man works when it is wrought upon by an absorbing emotion and a crushing experience.

*The Cabuliwallah* is a study in affection but it is in many ways subtler and more romantic than the other stories of this group. It describes the dawning of a warm friendship between Mini a tiny Bengali girl of Calcutta and Rahman a formidable looking fruit seller from the mountainous regions of North Western India. There is a remarkable contrast between the two friends—in age, religion, language, customs and associations and at first, this friendship seems to be nothing more than a casual acquaintance which has no firm foundation, at least for Rahman it does not appear to be anything more than a mere joke and a little fondness, which many grown up people have for children. Suddenly it is revealed that for the surly Cabuli wallah, this Bengali girl is more than a passing acquaint

ance, and the time she passes with her is an emotional necessity, because Mini reminds this sojourner of his little daughter whom he has left behind him in his home in the mountain fastnesses. His parental yearning is vicariously satisfied through the cordial friendship he has established with Mini. Nobody associates the softer emotions with a gruff Cabuliwallah who seems to be as hard as the mountains from which he comes; indeed, it is difficult for us to think in a human way about this heavy-bodied boor who serves a term of imprisonment for assaulting another man. The revelation of the emotional side of the Cabuliwallah comes suddenly at the end of the story; it has a stabbing effect partly because we were unprepared for it and partly because it shows in an unsuspected manner the universality of the primal emotions and of the fundamental unity of man. Parental love which is otherwise one of the most familiar things in our daily life is here suffused with a romantic, wistful tenderness, because it is associated with the exile's nostalgic yearning for his home and because the man suddenly awakens to the passage of years during which his daughter must have grown up as Mini has grown up, thus making it necessary for him to renew his friendship with her.

Two stories of domestic life—*Mashi* and *Vision*—are remarkable because of the intimate picture which the poet draws of the relationship between husband and wife and because in both of them there is a touch of abnormality—of psychology in the one and of situation in the other. Jotin, the protagonist of *Mashi*, is lying seriously ill, and the story ends with his death. He has tried in vain to win the heart of his wife who cares for nothing so much as idle pleasure and finds it boring to be tied to an ailing husband. An affectionate aunt weaves for the dying patient fantastic stories of his wife's devotion, but the falsity of these stories is easy to see through, and the servant Shambhu pulls down the paradise of lies built by the aunt. Face to face with death, Jotin at first finds it pleasant not to press too hard

the distinction between fact and fiction, and he loves to hug the prospect of Mani clinging to him as a devoted wife for in the haziness of the dying man's vision Mani becomes less a real human being than a world image with her throne on the altar of the stars at the confluence of life and death. Indeed, although he waits expectantly for a meeting with Mani he is not sorry when Mani does not really come at the expected moment, for in his sickly imaginings it seems to him that Mani's bodily presence would do violence to his fond vision of her. But there is a sudden and subtle change at the last moment. Shambhu's exposure dashes the image to the ground and the dying man can no longer afford to dally with falsehood. He who has never enforced his claims by violence never been a tyrant in his love wants, before his death, to face truth above everything else. Not only does he reject the false hopes and the ineffective medicines of the doctor but he also kicks off the shawl which the aunt falsely represented as having been woven by Mani. This passion for repelling all false pretences seizes the dying man like a frenzy, when death finally closes in upon him, and his vision is blurred and he cannot see what is at his feet he exclaims with hectic intensity 'No Mashu, not that shawl! not that shawl! That shawl is a fraud!'

*Vision* is a much finer story than *Mashu* because of the extraordinary subtlety with which a blind woman's emotions and her penetrating insight are portrayed. The story is told by the woman herself and over the whole of it there is an atmosphere of feminine delicacy and softness. If woman is not merely the female of the human species if through instinct or age long culture there is something angelically pure and sweet about her, that sweetness and purity which is beyond the reach of the sterner sex appears in Kumo's attitude to life in all her actions even in her shifts and lies. Kumo becomes blind but with the loss of her eyes her powers of perception gain in acuteness. From very trivial things she can sense correctly how her husband begins to tire of the attention he has to pay to a blind woman and

how gradually he hungers for a new wife. But even more subtle and delicate than this portraiture of the blind woman's sixth sense is the telling description of the mental chasm that begins to divide the husband who is out to achieve success and the wife who, just because of her blindness, has had no chance of being corrupted by the coarser pursuits of the world and has remained moored to the ideals of her early years. If she had eyes, she would possibly have shared her husband's craze for money, and her youthful idealism might have faded away as imperceptibly as did her husband's. "The separation caused by blindness", says she, "is the merest physical trifle. But ah! it suffocates me to find that he is no longer with me where he stood with me in that hour when we both knew that I was blind. That is a separation indeed!" The perception of this separation is shown through a number of striking incidents culminating in the description of the husband's reactions to the proposal of marriage with Hemangini. The conclusion is both romantic and comical, but although unexpected, it is not inappropriate, for it is in keeping with what we know of Hemangini, Kumo's brother, and even of her husband whose passion for Hemangini was like a nightmare which he is relieved to get rid of.

### III

In the two stories considered above—*Mashi* and *Vision*—nature supplies an appropriately significant background to the human drama of passion and pain. In *Mashi* Jotin thinks of the stars in the sky which look with amused silence on the transient excitements of human life and seem to say 'We have been watching for thousands of years, and know that all these great preparations for enjoyment are but vanity. But in another mood the immensity of the night and the sky becomes a symbol of Manu as she appears to his imagination. In *Vision*, the nearness of nature is more prominently emphasized. Kumo is blind, and, therefore,

like the minstrel in *The Cycle of Spring*, she sees with her whole body the beauty of nature which greets her as she leaves the cramping limitations of life in Calcutta for the freer atmosphere of the countryside, and it is characteristic of Rabindranath that he connects Kumo's poetical sensitiveness with the moral ideals of childhood

In some other stories Nature comes into more intimate contact with human life, and that is why these stories have a lyrical beauty which we do not find in stories that are more analytical. *The Supreme Night* is a story of love, but love here receives its ultimate consecration from Nature. The narrator of the story, who is also its hero, does not speak to Surabala who might have been his wife if only he had liked and has been married to another man, they do not even meet for once in society, and Surabala belongs, for the narrator, to the limbo of unrealized possibilities. But one night when there was a terrible flood they stood together, facing imminent death, the water had risen to their feet and if there had been just a wave more, it would sweep them both away. "In our far off childhood this Surabala had come from some dark primeval realm of mystery, from a life in another orb, and stood by my side on this luminous peopled earth, and today, after a wide span of time, she has left that earth, so full of light and human beings, to stand alone by my side amidst this terrible desolate gloom of Nature's death convulsion." This tremendous orgy of Nature seems to give a concrete shape to the unsatisfied and unutterable longings of the speaker and makes him taste eternal bliss. This experience is so unexpected and yet so all devouring that it makes all human speech look pitifully small and that is why not a word was exchanged between him and Surabala for once at least silence was more expressive than sound. Surabala just came and went, but she left behind her the aroma of the infinite and the ineffable. An interesting feature of this story is the serio-comic prelude, giving an account of the hero's quixotic ambitions and their frustration. It is the



contrast between this comic prelude and the fulfilment of the supreme night *that* gives the latter its majesty, but the frustration of his hopes shows that the fulfilment is not also *without its element of tragedy*

In *Subha* which is a story with a thin plot, the emphasis is laid primarily on the deep affinity that binds the human world to the natural and shows how this affinity is broken by what is considered man's proudest possession—his command over speech. This story is a wonderful portraiture of the yearning which the human heart feels for union with Nature in whose womb man waited for millions of years before his distinctive human qualities brought about a fission. To this primeval relationship the human soul can get back only by shedding its human equipage which has separated him from Nature. Banikantha's daughter can effect this union because being devoid of the power of speech, she is largely cut off from the noisy world of men and women. Emotions which are instinctive have their own individual forms which are known only to the mind that feels them. When they are expressed in words they have to be cast into a new mould, that of intelligible words. This is necessary if emotions are to be understood by others, but in thus acquiring intelligibility, they lose their original form which is too subtle for words. The nearest analogy to this process of transformation is supplied by the translation of a work of art from one language into another, here, in a new medium, the work loses its freshness but becomes intelligible for those who can have no access to the original. In the story of the dumb girl, Rabindranath tries to remove the film of the foreign medium imposed by words and recapture, as far as possible, the original purity of emotions when they spring spontaneously in the heart. *Subha* could not speak, that is why in the expression of her emotions there was not the inexactitude which is inseparable from human speech. In the human world she was lonely and silent, but she felt akin to the forces of Nature, and trees and rivers which have little to say to ordinary men and women were full of messages for

her. She was dumb like Nature, and like Nature, too, she was full of a majesty of her own. "In such tales," says Ernest Rhys, "Rabindranath confesses, as he does in his songs, his belief in the identity of Nature and man, of nature and supernature." If she was companionless amongst men and women, she was not without friends in the animal world—amongst goats and cows who, too, had not learnt to distort their emotions by expressing them through the medium of language. In the human world she had only one friend—a boy named Pratap. In this friendship there was an initial handicap, for as the boy was not dumb, he and Subha had no common language of silence. But as Pratap was not like other men as he did not join the vulgar craze for making his way up, he had leisure to understand Subha and to make himself understood by her. It has already been pointed out that the chief characteristic of Rabindranath's short stories is that they try to remove the outer film that screens emotions and to portray things lying behind the veil. In *Subha* Rabindranath succeeds in going to the inmost recesses of the soul, because the veil removed is that of human speech which is so intimately connected with human emotion that it has become almost a part of it. What appears to be the form which thoughts and emotions must inevitably assume is shown to be only a foreign medium through which feelings are translated rather than expressed, and by a supreme effort of the imagination the author does, indeed, get back to the original behind the translation.

There are some stories in which Rabindranath evokes not the magic of nature but "the fantasy of place." *The River Stairs* is one of the earliest of his stories, and it is one

and yearnings of which the persons concerned are themselves only half aware. Of these emotions and yearnings the ancient river stair is a mute spectator and custodian. Kusum is a girl widow pining away her life unknown and uncared for. The river stair knew her when she was a child, it missed her when she got married and left for her husband's home, and it recognized her footsteps as she returned—a widow at eight. After this there is very little of importance to report about her. Her soul is stirred when years after a *sanyasi* comes there and people whisper that this indeed is Kusum's husband who was reported dead. In narrating the incidents of the story the poet observes great delicacy and restraint. It is not clearly stated if Kusum's husband actually died, they said that he worked in a far off place and a letter brought the news that he was dead. Was he actually dead or did he leave the world and become a *sanyasi*, sending from afar the false news of his death to avoid being searched out by his relations? Did he come to this village in course of his wanderings or did he come there knowing that his wife was there? Was he really the husband of Kusum or was it merely a guess of some women who had seen him? What was Kusum's own opinion? Did she remember her husband whom she must have met infrequently between the years of seven and eight? To all these questions the river stair can give no answer, it only records what it hears from people gathering on its steps. But its limitation is also its merit as a recorder and narrator. It knows what nobody else knows—Kusum's mental restlessness at the appearance of the *sanyasi* and her seeking peace and joy through daily service of him. And then her mind becomes disturbed again for she has a dream that her religious worship is only the offering of a woman to her lover. The realization that her service is tainted with carnal desire comes to her in the shape of a dream, it seems to be too ethereal to be a feeling or an idea. Then she has a short interview with the *sanyasi*, and although the rest of the world has no knowledge of this tense moment in the life

of the *sanyasi* and of Kusum, the river stair has heard every word and noted the slightest variation in emphasis or the faintest tremor in the movement of limbs. To Kusum who narrates her experience with sobs and tears, the *sanyasi* says, "Know that I am a *sanyasi*, not belonging to this world. You must forget me." The stress on "you" makes us wonder if the *sanyasi* is speaking to a new devotee or to a forsaken wife. Whatever the truth about his relationship to Kusum may be, the fact is that the *sanyasi* feels much more agitated than his words indicate. As Kusum wipes her tears and tells her tale, the *sanyasi* firmly presses the stone surface with his right foot. He can conceal his weakness from Kusum or from the rest of mankind, but not from the river stair which can penetrate behind the *sanyasi's* strength into the lover's weakness.

The most famous and the most daringly imaginative of Rabindranath's short stories is *The Hungry Stones* in which the great story teller portrays the witchery of an old building. "When we think," says Ernest Rhys, "of places on which romance has breathed the spell of a past crowded with apparitions and filled with half-realizable memories, we shall feel tempted, after reading the story of the Hungry Stones to add the Palace of Barich to their number." In this story the poet removes the screen that divides the past from the present and recreates a story of the palace that is two hundred and fifty years old as also the unsatisfied longings and lurid flames of the blazing passions of the young women who were confined within this place. The poet's imagination is both suggestive and reconstructive. From history or legend he gets hints of the heart aches and blasted hopes of many beautiful women recruited from Persia or Arabia, who passed their days here in luxury and in ecstasies of passion and pain, and he then imagines that the unrequited yearnings passed from the women into the stones which became frenzied with the hunger of unsatisfied love. He does not narrate the story of any particular woman as he might have done by filling in details from fancy or legend.

such a narration would spoil the delicate thrill that survives in the stones and render the story too broadly human. He makes use of hints that suggest more than they say and loads the atmosphere with half heard whispers and half seen lights and shadows. The night calls back to life the beauty and passion of the women who lived in the palace in the past, but in daytime their witchery is gone. Even at night the women, although restored to some sort of life, are more like startling apparitions than like women of flesh and blood. The Persian beauty has ruddy soft feet and we have details about her *pajamas*, slippers and bodice, but even if she has a local habitation, she has no name, no individual history, she is just a part of the hunger and thirst that has clung to the stones, although the speaker pursues her from path to path in a bewildering maze of alleys, he cannot catch her because, after all, she is little more than an unbodied thrill. Many a kiss as well as many a caress is wafted in the breeze, there are soft murmurs and fragrant breaths and handkerchiefs seem to float in the dark, but although these perceptions are there, no woman leaves her stony dwelling place and becomes a live creature again. The author's principal achievement consists in the manner in which he maintains the balance between a delicate flutter and hard reality, in the way he gives the essence of womanly charm without portraying a woman. It is from this point of view that we can best realize the significance of the abrupt, realistic ending. The experience of the speaker and of Meher Ali makes us curious about the women who lived in the palace and whose passions the stones have so marvellously preserved. And the Head Clerk Karim Khan does indeed proceed to narrate the history of a young Persian girl who lived in the pleasure dome, but just then the train arrives and the tale breaks off. It is quite in the fitness of things that our curiosity should remain unsatisfied for if the tale had been told, we should have got the portrait of a woman but the magic of womanhood would have vanished.

## IV

It has been pointed out already that the abnormal experiences recorded in *The Hungry Stones* all happen at night. It is in the darkness of the night alone that the stones can cast their spell. One wonders how far Nature co-operates with the charmed building in calling dead passions and frustrated longings back to life. The agency of Nature becomes specially prominent in certain incidents which could not have occurred by themselves. One evening the hero of the story decided to go out on horseback putting on his English hat and coat, and although the invisible companions of night implored him to stay, he would listen to no entreaties on that day and made preparations to start. Suddenly there came a whirlwind with the sands of the river driving away the hat and the coat, while a merry peal of laughter rose higher and higher, ridiculing the man's vain efforts to free himself from the charm of the place. Is the merry laughter only the wind rustling among the dead leaves or is it really a human titter coming from the hungry stones? Whatever that may be, the wind did help to frustrate the project that was disapproved of by the invisible charmers and it did play its part in the human drama. The next evening as he returns to the building in contrition and wants to surrender himself at the foot of his unseen friend suddenly two tear drops fall from above on his brow. Whose are these tear drops? Do they come mysteriously from the invisible charmer who accepts his contrition and is eager to forgive him? Or are these drops released by the dark masses of clouds which overcast the top of the Avalli hills that day? Even if the latter explanation be correct, why do the clouds drop these particles at the psychological moment unless Nature is collaborating with the temptress lying hidden within the stones?

In many other places Rabindranath makes Nature the vehicle of supernatural suggestions. Chief amongst these stories is *In The Night* in which a dead wife seems to haunt

the surviving husband and to express her resentment at his taking a second wife. Even when she was passing through her last illness, she knew that her husband was being attracted towards this girl and she committed suicide in order to make their union possible. But on the first day of her meeting her, she could not see her distinctly in the gloom of the evening; she only felt that some one was standing near the door, and a cry broke spontaneously from her: "O ke (Who is that), O ke, O ke?" as if she instinctively felt the presence of a supplanter. When she dies, this terror-stricken cry seems to communicate itself to the forces of Nature which has a longer memory than man, and occasionally when the husband Dokhin Babu makes passionate love to his second wife, Nature laughs ironically at him or seems to exclaim, "O ke, O ke, O ke?" This mocking laughter or this cry which haunts him from time to time may only be the moaning of the wind or it may be just the sound of a flock of ducks or the call of a waterfowl, which Dokhin Babu, in his heated, fuddled brain, interprets as the resentment of his first wife, wafted to him from beyond the grave. But the persistence with which the cry haunts him seems to suggest that there is something more than the mere sighing of the wind or the sound made by birds, and indeed, Nature herself seems to be only the instrument through which the ghost of the dead woman expresses its indignation.

The manner in which the story is narrated calls for special comment. Dokhin Babu has some similarity with Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Like the Mariner he has passed through a terrible experience, like the Mariner he has no rest until he can tell his tale and like the Mariner he can hold his hearer spell-bound. But he has neither the Mariner's skinny hand nor his glittering eye. These we find in the narrator of the story *The Lost Jewels*, whom the author expressly likens to the Ancient Mariner. In this story, too, some abnormal occurrence—obviously a murder—seems to leave its imprint on Nature which becomes charged with supernatural suggestions. The wife Mani had left her

husband's home in a boat with all her precious jewellery on her person under the escort of Modhu an inferior clerk in her husband's establishment. She did not return and no trace was found of Modhu, who it is quite clear, had drowned her and then decamped with her jewels. At night in the deserted house the bereaved husband Bhusan hears the jingling of ornaments and a knocking at the door, the sound seems to reach him from the bank of the river where Mani took her boat, but one wonders if this sound is really made up of the pattering of the rain, the croaking of frogs the buzzing of moths which are mixed up with the songs sung by boys in a village opera troupe. These sounds are there no doubt, and they become fearful on account of the deep darkness of the night. But the persistence with which these sounds haunt Bhusan makes us wonder if the darkness of the night and the puzzling sounds are not merely the appropriate means through which Mani's ghost returns to the earth? Indeed, one day when the deep darkness has been succeeded by pale moonlight, a skeleton bedecked with jewels comes to Bhusan and beckons him to the river where he, too, meets a watery grave. Is this skeleton a mere figment of Bhusan's brain or is it a real ghost who comes from that undiscovered country from whose bourne some traveller does occasionally return to the earth?

There is one feature of the story which, though remarkable, is of dubious appropriateness. Did the experience really occur to some one or is the whole thing a fiction? The hearer of the story is Bhusan himself whose presence is a stout denial of the concluding part of the story, and he says that his wife's name was Nrityakali and not Manimalika. Even the narrator himself says at the end that the story is too much like fiction to be true. Then why does Bhusan hear the story till the end and not prick the bubble at the start? Is he held spell bound by the narrator as the wedding guest is by the Mariner in Coleridge's ballad or does he only listen with amused curiosity to an old man spinning a yarn? Both the hypotheses may be true, Rabindranath



seems to attempt here a bold experiment at mixing the make-believe of the supernatural with the scepticism of real life. It must, however, be admitted that one misses in this story that touch of authenticity which one finds in Coleridge's poems of the supernatural or in stories like *The Hungry Stones* and *In The Night*.

The interest of *The Skeleton* is very complex. It is apparently a story of the supernatural, because it is told at night and the speaker is a ghost. But it is really a tale of human love and its frustration, but as the speaker views it from the other side of the grave, where she realizes the ghastly end of her beauty, there is an undercurrent of mockery all through her narration. The author shows wonderful recreative imagination, and the way in which the beauty and the amorous yearning of the young widow are described is worthy of Keats. The speaker does not give an account of her own beauty in the cold manner of a historian; it was something which maddened herself and a young doctor. She seems to have been Venus and Narcissus rolled into one—Venus who is the adored of all males and Narcissus—who was infatuated with his own shadow. There is scarcely anything in literature which is more luxuriantly sensuous than the picture of the young widow when she met the doctor for the first time and of the effects of the meeting on her. But all through her poetical recreation of her beauty which was so fascinating once upon a time, there is the constant reminder that it was all vanity, for the end of it all is that she is now a mere skeleton that is used for teaching students the science of osteology. Her dark, bright, languishing eyes have become two cavernous hollows and nothing has remained of her ruby lips except a set of grinning teeth; yet she cannot forget that once upon a time a young doctor, who was versed in the science of osteology, compared her to a golden *champak* flower, and this shows that although the rest of mankind may illustrate the laws of physiology, to him at least she was too ethereal to serve any such coarse purpose.

*Living or Dead* is not exactly a story of the supernatural, it portrays the peculiar feeling of a person who is alive but feels that she is dead. It is an extraordinarily powerful psychological study, showing how the normal human mind tries to accommodate itself to an abnormal experience and fails. Kadambini was taken to be dead and then carried to the burning ground to be cremated. There she suddenly regains her consciousness and begins to adjust herself anew to the once familiar world which has now been transformed for her into an alien region. Her first feeling is that the dark room in which she is confined must be Hades, the realm of the God of Death. Then a cold wind that sends a shiver through her body reminds her that she is on the earth, but as she must have been dead, she thinks that she is not of it, she must be now a ghost who will only bring misery to her house. Along with this uncanny sensation, there is also an accession of strength, because she feels that the bonds which tied her to the earth have all snapped. At the return of daylight, however, she is seized with terror, for she feels that she is a creature of night who has strayed into daylight. Then she goes to the house of her old friend Jogmaya, but she cannot accept the life around her. There is always something unusual in her conduct, because she cannot get rid of the feeling that she is dead and belongs no longer to the world of the living. When she comes to the house she lived in before her supposed death, there is a sudden change in her, and the most remarkable thing in this amazing story is the portraiture of the contrast between her reactions in these two houses. It was difficult for her to adapt herself to the unfamiliar surroundings in Jogmaya's household, there she felt that death stood between her and her friend. But when she returns to her own house, the old rooms and the old things which have remained unchanged convince her that she, too, is not dead, this feeling is reinforced by her attachment to a child whom she loved more than anything else. The intimate feeling of love proves stronger than the superimposed feeling of death. "In her

friend's house she had felt that her childhood's companion was dead. In her child's room she knew that the boy's 'Auntie' was not dead at all." But whatever her own feelings might be, she fails to persuade the people around her that she is not dead, and that is why she cannot find her place back in her own home. She solves the problem by committing suicide; by dying she proves to the world that she was not dead.

## V

Rabindranath is known to the world chiefly as a lyric poet, and the stamp of his poetical genius is found, too, on his experiments in prose. But occasionally he has dwelt with varying success on themes that do not yield to poetical treatment. One of these is prose satire, and four of his satirical stories—*The Parrot's Training*, *The Trial of the Horse*, *The Old Man's Ghost* and *Great News* have been translated into English. These cannot compare with great satirical stories like *A Tale of a Tub*, their chief limitation being that the allegorical intention is too prominent; very little is left to suggestion and the characterization lacks both subtlety and depth. The weakest of these is *Great News* in which there is a conflict between the oars which work and the sails which do nothing but claim that it is they who move the boat. The editor says that this sketch, "a parable of this age, presages the imminent conflict between the oars who labour, and the parasitic sail that claims the direction of the boat while doing so little. The account has to be settled, though the boatman wants them both. That is the great news: need of a drastic adjustment." Although an allegory is not an elaborate argument, some questions have to be answered before this piece can be appreciated either as satire or as story. It is easy to understand whom the oars stand for but it is difficult to say who are represented by the sails. If they are parasites, why should the boatman need them at all? And if a readjustment is necessary, what are the lines on which this readjustment is to be made? In the

story the boatman solves the crisis by flattering and running them down alternately. This may be what is being done by society at present, but what should be the duty of society in future? The meaning seems to be lost in a maze of vague innuendoes.

The best of these satirical sketches is *The Old Man's Ghost* which deals with man's obsession with the past and his indolence about the future. The past is represented as the Old Man's Ghost which is a powerful portrait. The Ghost relieves men of all their worries and is portrayed as sitting on men's shoulders and stopping all movement. The advantage of the Ghost is that it has no head and therefore cannot suffer from headaches. Its other advantage is that it is unchanging, man dies but a ghost does not. The entire population, being ghost ridden, is saved the trouble of thinking and even seeing, in their blindness the people have affinity with fate with grass and with amoeba the link with the past gives aristocratic dignity to a people that does not want to worry about the future.

The effect of the Ghost's domination is that the people are kept quiescent, they are lulled to sleep. But even if they want to be restful and to go to sleep, people of other countries will not let them remain in peace. This situation is very beautifully expressed by the poet's applying to this context the most popular Bengali lullaby which has thus been translated

"The baby sleeps the neighbourhood is quiet,  
The invaders (Maratha *Bargis*) enter the land  
The *bulbulis* have eaten the corn  
How to pay the taxes?

If the baby wants to sleep leaving all cares to the Old Man's Ghost, it is an excellent arrangement, but the *bulbulis*, who do not care for the Ghost will eat away the corn and the invaders will insist on the payment of taxes which will have to be paid with modesty, with honour, with conscience and with heart's blood.

## CHAPTER XI

### NOVELS

#### I

One of the principal characteristics of Rabindranath as a writer is the extraordinary fertility of his imagination. Although primarily a lyric poet, he is the author of a large number of short stories and poetical dramas and he has even trenched on the field of prose fiction which is far removed from that of lyric poetry. His later novels, as will appear from the discussion that follows, constitute a new genre in which prose fiction is wedded to poetry and in course of its transformation loses part of its own distinctiveness. In his earlier novels, however, such as *The Wreck* and *Gora*, he keeps faithful to the more realistic standards of prose fiction; we may apply to these novels the comment he has himself made of Saratchandra: he has "brought our fiction close to the everyday life of the people." *Gora*, particularly, portrays the impact of political and social movements on the sensitive minds of cultured men and women in Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

*The Wreck* is not a problem novel; it introduces the complications that arise in the life of a man who, on account of an accident, has been tagged on to a girl who passes for his wife but is not so in fact, and then it proceeds to narrate the unexpected coincidences which straighten the tangle. Although not free from defects, the plot is ingeniously conceived and carefully constructed. Professor V. Lesny points out, too, that the contrast between the characters is artistically drawn and betrays the hand of a master. This applies not only to the principal pairs, Ramesh and Nalinaksha, Kamala and Hemnalini, Annada Babu and Kshemankari, mother of Nalinaksha, but also to the minor characters. It must be remembered, however, that construction of plots

and contrasting of characters are, more or less mechanical devices that merely help an artist to project his sense of life, it is the portraiture of characters that reveals it. In other words the greatness of a novel or a drama depends on the extent to which the author has been able to sound the depths of human character and on the degree in which the characters live on their own account without merely subserving the necessities of plot or the demands of propaganda. Judged by this standard, the first half of *The Wreck* contains the extraordinary portraiture of a woman who is puzzled by kindness that stops short of love. After Ramesh has known that Kamala is not his wife, he cannot live with him as her husband, but neither can he cast her off. This novel situation brings out the subtle undercurrents in the heart of a woman who gets affection but also realizes with a woman's unerring instinct that this affection is different from the intimacy a wife expects from a husband. On board the steamer she is drawn nearer to Ramesh and becomes his housewife, but she learns with pain that a housewife is not necessarily a wife and that there is a world of difference between the two. Indeed she can become very intimate with uncle Chakrabarti and Umesh (and then later on with Sailaja) but Ramesh holds aloof from her, yet it is the devotion of these other persons that makes her painfully conscious of a fundamental emptiness in her life—an emptiness that Ramesh alone can fill. Before she meets Sailaja her awareness of this void is a half instinctive craving which expresses itself through many indirections—it seems to be an instinct which springs spontaneously from the roots of life. She can get over this disturbance by daytime, but it returns to her at night with the mysteriousness, indistinctness and irresistibility of a natural convulsion and very appropriately Rabindranath makes her find the prototype of her emotion in a violent storm that she experiences on board the steamer.

Kamala could not define the emotion that stirred in her breast as she gazed upon the wild sky and the turmoil

of the night, it may have been fear and it may have been joy

There was an untamed force, an untrammelled freedom, in the raging of the elements that struck some dormant chord in her soul. The violence of Nature's revolt fascinated her. Against what was Nature rebelling? In the roaring of the tempest Kamala heard no answer to this question. The reply was inarticulate like the storm in her own breast. Surely it was an effort to tear asunder and cast aside some formless impalpable web of deceit and illusion and obscurity that shook the earth to its foundations to the accompaniment of the agonized shrieking of the tempest.

Not only is the image poetically suggestive but through it the author fathoms the depths of the human soul and expresses the elemental craving which lies beyond all intellectual strivings and is, indeed, the creative urge of life itself. The drama in Ramesh's soul is less subtle, but it is humanly interesting in its own way. He can, if he likes, reject Kamala at a stroke, and he can equally easily accept her and cut the knot. But he has such a cultured mind that he can do neither, and it is his inability to arrive at a simple conclusion that makes him a fascinating character. If towards the later chapters the threads slip from his hands to be taken over by a benevolent Destiny and he fades as a character, it does not detract from the charm of his personality, and he remains the most effective male portrait in the novel.

The second half of *The Wreck* shows a distinct falling off, because here the development of character is sacrificed to the necessities of the plot. After Kamala has known that Ramesh is not her husband, she banishes him completely from her mind, and the author's only interest is to place her in Nalinaksha's path. It is curious that she does not stop to think for a moment of the man who, while giving her the position of a wife, did so much to preserve her from sin. No new light is thrown on her character, and we are shown how she manages to meet her real husband rather

than how her soul reacts to the surprising turn in the tide of events. For the sake of symmetry and not through any inherent necessity Hemnalini is proposed in marriage to Nalinaksha, but the incident serves no artistic purpose and is soon closed. Nalinaksha has little to do except receive Kamala without demur, but as he is the husband of the heroine, he has to be made a major character. He has, however, no part to play in the story, that is why he is filled out with words and becomes a windbag.

## II

*Gora* is Rabindranath's longest novel, it deals with complicated personal and domestic relationships, and woven into them are many social and political problems of modern India. The events are given a definite local and temporal habitation, they occur in the later decades of the nineteenth century, say, twenty five years after the Mutiny, and they occur, too, in Calcutta and in some typical villages in Bengal. The outlines of the story are clear and so is the background. As it is a long novel, there are many incidents and the minor characters are so elaborately portrayed that they look like protagonists, suggesting a comparison in this respect with Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Emphasis is placed in these secondary characters on prominent traits rather than on subtle nuances, which combined with similar other features, gives this novel the largeness and grandeur of an epic. Paresh Babu, Krishnadayal, Bordashundari, Hari mohini, Mohim Panu Babu, Satish—these characters have each of them, a few distinctive traits but this distinctiveness is writ so large that the lack of variety or subtlety cannot be regarded as a defect. Everyone of them has a vivid sharply limned personality.

The greatest character is Gora who is a patriot, feels ardently for his country and has intense hatred for the foreigner who has not only enslaved her but as a necessary corollary to his domination holds her in contempt. As the



foreigner pours his ridicule mostly on Indian or Hindu culture, religion and practices, Gora, whose imagination dominates his intellect, becomes the champion of Hinduism which he identifies with India. There is a fundamental contradiction in his loyalty. As an orthodox Brahmin, he has to keep aloof from everything that may defile him, he has to avoid contact with non-Hindus and low castes. But as a patriotic Indian he feels that he is one with the humblest of his countrymen, he stands up for those who are being oppressed by the alien ruler and his native myrmidons, and he prefers staying with a barber who has adopted a Mohammedan boy to the hospitality offered by a rascally Brahmin who has assisted in oppressing poor villagers. When, however, he is sent to gaol, he feels that his Brahminism has been soiled in the prison where he has not been able to observe the rules of orthodoxy but he feels, too, that by going into gaol he has realized his kinship with the oppressed millions of India.

This contradiction is revealed in his personal life, too. As a champion of Hindu orthodoxy he stands for early marriage and seclusion of women, and he has unqualified scorn for Brahmos who have broken away from the Hindu fold. But his meetings with Sucharita unfold to him a new aspect of reality. Here is a girl whom he cannot regard as one of his own, his India has no room for her. Yet he feels attracted towards her by a tie which is stronger than that of tradition or opinion, it is the tie of sympathy between two souls who understand each other, and behind this spiritual affinity there is the biological attraction a man feels for a woman. If he accepts her the beliefs he has held dear have to be scrapped, if he refuses to accept her, his idealism becomes emptied of content. It is only by making a synthesis between his old faith and his new realization in a comprehensive vision of India that his patriotism can fulfil itself. It is when he becomes acutely conscious of the conflict between the two forces by which he is swayed that he comes to know the secret of his birth and the conflict

vanishes into thin air. This, however, is an artificial solution, the knowledge that Gora is an Irishman comes to him as it were, from a *deus ex machina*, and he is united to Sucharita under the tutelage of the Brahmo Pareesh Babu. If Gora had been able to resolve the contradiction through a spiritual struggle, his story would have made a great novel. But Rabindranath betrays here an indolence about fundamentals, rather than portray the intricate spiritual struggle that is aroused in Gora's heart, he ends it mechanically, almost as soon as it begins. In this respect the portrait of Anandamoyi is an effective contrast to that of Gora. Anandamoyi was born in the house of a Pandit at Benares the centre of Hindu culture, and she inherited an attachment to Hindu orthodoxy, but when she adopts as her child Gora who is an Irishman's son, her beliefs undergo a strange transformation, she realized that life is larger than dogma, and although she remains a Hindu in her faith she rejects that part of her religion which raises barriers between man and man. That is why she can easily take a humane view of all social and domestic problems, and it is noticeable that she approves of the marriage of Binoy and Lolita more quickly than does Pareesh Babu himself. For her the adoption of Gora as a child is a real experience it shakes the foundations of her beliefs and gives her a new religion. But the revelation comes to Gora from the outside, it does not reshape him from within it only cuts him off from his old moorings.

Binoy has not the intrepid personality that distinguishes Gora, but he occupies so much space that he is almost a second protagonist in the novel which is named after his friend. He is a cultured young man who is much more open minded than Gora but is carried away by Gora's energy and patriotic fervour. It will, however be a mistake to imagine that he is a mere shadow of Gora without any personality of his own. Indeed, when there is a crisis in his life, he can, without much difficulty throw off the claims of friendship, because he feels that this friendship is

tending to cramp rather than broaden his life. His decision to marry Lolita does not mean that he sacrifices his convictions to the fascination of a woman; rather this marriage shows that he has the courage to face and acknowledge truth even when it involves a wrench from most of his old ties.

The episode of Binoy and Lolita, although it shows the gradual unfolding of their personalities, has been spoilt by over-elaboration and insistence on circumstantial details. Once Binoy and Lolita have decided on breaking away from their old associations, it seems to be immaterial whether they are married in accordance with Hindu or Brahmo forms of worship or whether they abjure all ceremonials altogether. It seems that the final decision is that they are married according to Hindu rites, but they dispense with an idol. It will be doing injustice to the novelist to suggest that he intended all this as a propaganda for introducing a new form of Hindu marriage, but it is difficult to say what else all this pother is about. Much is made of the oppression to which Lolita is subjected by the pillars of Brahmo Samaj including her own mother, who all try to force Binoy to become a Brahmo in order to be able to marry into a Brahmo family. The tactics employed by these pillars are extremely coarse, and the portraiture of the struggle between individual conscience and social tyranny is very superficial. If Lolita is prepared to give a shock to her mother's feelings, it does not require much strength or intelligence to dispose of Panu Babu's arguments or to see through the tricks employed by him and his associates. The real pressure of society on individuals is much less obtrusive and much more insidious but it is also much more pervasive; society spreads its tentacles everywhere, even in the hearts of those who rebel against it. How deep, penetrating and wide-spread the pressure of social forces may be has been effectively portrayed in many novels and dramas, in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, in many of Shaw's plays and in Saratchandra's novels, to take only a few examples. Rabindranath confines himself to the surface, and his representation is cheap and tedious.

There are critics who look upon *Gora* as the greatest Bengali novel, but such critics have, obviously, an imperfect acquaintance with Bengali literature. The fact is that although *The Wreck* and *Gora* are excellent in parts, neither of them is a great novel. Rather do they reveal that the realistic and psychological novel in which subtleties of character are unfolded through a gradually evolving story is unsuited to his genius which is pre-eminently mystical and lyrical. Quoting Mr E. M. Forster's comment on *The Home and the World*, we may say, 'Not here, O Nirvana, are haunts meet for thee.' It seems that Tagore himself felt the limitations of this art form and tried to invent a new kind of novel which would subordinate both narration and analysis to the poetical representation of an idea.

### III

Dr Srikumar Banerjee shows in great detail that after *Gora* Rabindranath's art in the novel underwent a change. He abjured the long novel with its intricate plot, lengthy description and slow development of character, and his method became more suggestive and less analytical. His first experiments in this branch of art, which may be claimed as an invention of his own, are *Broken Ties* and *The Home and the World*. *Broken Ties* is one of the best of his works, it rivals the English *Gitanjali* and the Bengali *Balaka*. It is difficult to say if *Broken Ties* is a novel at all, for it has not that completeness, that gradual building of plot or character which we expect from a novel. The plot consists of fragments that have been chosen for their suggestiveness rather than for their place in the evolution of a narrative. There are many striking characters and they have been portrayed deeply too, but the impression is nevertheless produced that we get only glimpses of them and do not witness the gradual unfolding of their whole personality. Every character is sharply individualized, yet he or she is less an individual than the symbol of an idea.

And all the characters and all the incidents seem to be intended to project aspects of an idea which is the bond uniting the broken ties; the novel or the symbolist prose-poem portrays the quest of the human soul for truth.

Satish is the hero of this quest. In course of his introduction to the French edition of this book, Romain Rolland gives high praise to Jagamohan, Damini and Srivilas but demurs to the portraiture of Satish who, he says, is of a kind rather remote from Europeans. Satish is Eastern to the tips of his fingers; he is as Indian as the Ganges; he represents the quest which the Indian soul has been pursuing through ages for truth which is greater than fact, wider than dogma, purer than piety and more concrete and personal than universal principles. He wants truth that combines the vitality of earth with the holiness of heaven. The word that is most frequently used in this book is the untranslatable *rasa* which may stand for the pleasure given by delicious food, the fun in a humorous story, emotion, especially erotic emotion, the delight aroused by an artistic product, and the joy in the contemplation of the Absolute. It is to be observed that the purer the *rasa*, the more dissociated is it from the object which generates it. The noblest kinds of *rasa* are the poetical and the religious: in the former form predominates over content and in the latter the object of contemplation is the disembodied spirit. Being freed from the endless Becoming through which it expresses itself. That is why these two *rasas* are called twins, for both of them aim at freedom. But the problem is: Is it possible to release the Absolute from the bondage of the relative, to dissociate form from matter? This is the problem which Satish faces; it is a universal problem but it has engaged the Eastern mind more than the Western, and that is why although Satish is remote from Europeans, he is so truly Indian.

Satish begins as a pupil of his uncle, a rationalist-atheist, a believer in Malthus and Bentham, and an unforgettable character. But great as the uncle is, the nephew

is greater For the uncle, who trusts blindly to reason "nothingness is", as Rolland points out, "a principle of joy and goodness", because it means freedom from the bondage of creed and dogma But the positivist uncle cannot rationally explain why he should do good to others. To Satish he said, "Babā, we are atheists And therefore the very pride of it should keep us absolutely stainless Because we have no respect for any higher being than ourselves therefore we must respect ourselves" Although there is no mention of what Satish said about this explanation he must have instinctively felt that this argument is more sentimental than rational And then there was the stabbing experience of Nonibala who throws to the winds all the utilitarian arrangements made by the uncle and Satish and commits suicide because she could not forget her rascally seducer The limitations of uncle Jagamohan's rationalism are obvious enough He cannot understand emotion either in himself or in others Indeed, it seems that his rationalistic atheism is a principle of joy only because it means freedom from bondage, it has no positive content of its own

It is little wonder that Satish who is a restless seeker after Truth should recoil from the path of rationalistic activity after his uncle's death If we piece together Satish's scattered statements it becomes clear that there was yet another reason why Satish tired of his uncle's positivism It is very difficult to justify utilitarianism on rational grounds alone, reason need not necessarily impel a man to do good to others In the ultimate analysis the freedom of reason must be the freedom of whims, and liberty then is indistinguishable from licence These considerations now make Satish a follower of Vaishnavism the tear-drenched cult of emotional communion and as a Vaishnavite he seeks salvation by following a *Guru*, a master who will save him from the pitfalls of rationalism Vaishnavism preaches a mystical union between the human soul and God as it is the sublimation of the erotic sentiment the love of man and woman is so much universalized that all

traces of sensuousness are removed from it Satish becomes a follower of this creed, because it is not so empty as rationalism, because it gives him the support of a *guru* and because being a mystical creed, it is free from the dross of reality But a religion of emotion is as unsatisfying as a religion of reason A man's religion is a thing for personal realization, and the *guru* must, therefore, be more a hindrance than a help If, again, the *guru* is eliminated, a religion of emotions means only the exaltation of individual whims This, however, is only a minor limitation The chief defect of this religion is that being mystical and universal, it dissociates itself from reality which is sensuous and particular, and reality pops its head in the shape of Damini who refuses to join the emotional ecstasies of these votaries and their worship of the *guru*, and even when she does occasionally conform, she makes it clear that she surrenders herself to a particular person rather than to a symbol or an idea She points out to the devotees that by trying to escape from reality they keep up a continual state of excitement which is the very negation of the peace they seek And if they talk unceasingly of *rasa*, do they know what it actually is? If it is quintessential passion, does such a thing actually exist? In real life there is Nabin's passion for his wife's sister whom he intended to marry to his younger brother and marries himself His wife arranges the marriage and then commits suicide This is "passion in its true colours" 'It has neither religion nor duty, it knows neither pity nor trust, nor modesty, nor shame' Damini objects to the Vaishnava religion of emotion which wants to cure earthly passion by replacing it with passion for the Lord, as if, she argues, fire can be quenched by fire, excitement of one kind killed by excitement of another A graver objection to this creed which refines and sublimates emotion is supplied by Damini herself,—she who refuses to be ignored, who wants from life its full cup of fulfilment As a Vaishnavite Satish wants to eliminate woman whom he looks upon as a creation of *maya*, but the real woman of

flesh and blood will not adapt herself to the conveniences of a creed, for creeds are made for man and woman and not man and woman for creeds

The turmoil caused by the presence of Damini, who will never agree to the elimination of sensuousness, helps Satish to see the limitations of his religion, and he breaks away from Lilananda Swami's Vaishnavite orgies. Contact with Satish enables Damini to purge her soul, she is saved by him and calls him her *guru*. She accepts Srivilas as husband and sets up as the mistress of a household. But Satish has made her acquainted with spiritual values and that is why she can keep herself and Srivilas above the drabness and the smallness we find in the day to day existence of a householder. As her husband appropriately puts it, "So the Damini whom I gained became neither housewife nor *maya*. She ever remained true to herself,—my Damini." For Satish the solution is not so simple indeed, for him there is no solution at all, because he is less an individual human being than the spirit of endless voyaging after Truth. Once he had busied himself in practical activity, enjoying what he himself called the freedom of the playground. Then he lost himself in a frenzy of emotion which, for him, was freedom on the high seas. But he leaves this, too, and goes on questing after the Absolute. He believes that he has found the key to Truth which he describes thus. He loves 'form, so He is continually descending towards form. We cannot live by form alone so we must ascend towards His formlessness. He is free so His play is within bonds. We are bound so we find our joy in freedom'. What this new freedom is like and how he will strive towards formlessness we do not know. Satish says that he has understood, and it seems that he has found the peace that subsists at the heart of endless agitation.

The most remarkable thing about *Broken Ties* is its originality of technique, the manner in which the underlying idea is expressed. It is a story, and that is why there are a number of incidents making up a plot and also a



number of characters. But it is clear that the central thing in it is neither the story nor any character, but an idea, and the idea is the mystery of spiritual quest. That is why there is something ethereal about the story and something elfin about the characters. The technical novelty displayed in the narration of the story is that only striking incidents are selected and none is elaborated so that the incidents that happen are not only impressive as events but also suggestive of ideas. From this point of view their fragmentariness is part of their value, because they imply much more than they express. Take, for example, the episodes of Nonibala and of Nabin's wife, who are, more or less intruders into the main story. These episodes are narrated in sharp outline and with severe economy, we are not taken through any long elaboration of Purandar's and Nabin's seduction of the two girls. The severity with which all unnecessary details are eschewed is itself a proof that the only significance of these incidents lies in the part they play in pointing out the limitations of Satish's religion at different stages. There is the same fugitiveness about the main characters—Jagamohan, Damini and Satish. Little is said of the uncle after the death of Nonibala. Damini does not live for more than a year after her marriage with Srivilas, and Satish does not strike roots anywhere. The characters are full of vitality, they are sharply individualized, but they are less important as human personalities than as characters in a brilliant phantasmagoria of contending ideals. Everywhere in the book it is the spiritual rather than the narrative context that is important. Only Srivilas is an exception, he is more a normal human being than a participant in an ideological drama, but he is necessary, because he sees through and understands everybody, his mind is the kaleidoscope which receives the flitting images of this dream.

This suggestiveness is found not only in the management of the story and the delineation of characters but also in the descriptions and even in the humorous passages.

Jagamohan's comments on the traditional form of address in Bengali letters "To the gracious feet (plural and not dual) of"—is excellent fun, and this raillery, enjoyable in itself, is also highly expressive of the character of a relentless logician who is not prepared to accept even the most harmless formality unless it passes the test of reason. The descriptions of nature are full of burning poetry, besides giving us beautiful scenes they also project something beyond sensuous beauty. The portraiture of the storm on pp 110 111 may be quoted

'The river was lashed into foaming waves, and a flood of rain burst forth from the clouds. The splashing of the *waves down below and the dashing of the torrents from above*, played the cymbals in this chroitic revel of the gods. Nothing could be seen of the deafening movements which resounded within the depths of the darkness and made the sky, like a blind child, break into shivers of fright. Out of the bamboo thickets pierced a scream as of some bereaved giantess. From the mango groves burst the cracking and crashing of breaking timber. The river side echoed with the deep thuds of falling masses from the crumbling banks. Through the bare ribs of our dilapidated house, the keen blasts howled and howled like infuriated beasts."

It is a powerful description of a storm but the image of the cymbals and of the blind child, the references to the bereaved giantess, revelling gods and infuriated beasts suggest that there is something beyond the storm that the fury of wind and water is only the natural manifestation of some supernatural force which is in tune with the moods of the human actors whose minds have been terribly unhinged. The most extraordinary description is the extract from Satish's diary, giving his experience of fleshliness in all its strength, mystery and terror. There is scarcely anything in symbolist literature that is more moving than this picture of Satish's encounter with Damini inside the cave. The slower technique of the novel would have required lengthy and detailed portraiture of how

Damini tries to entice Satish and how Satish reacts to the enticement. But in such a description Damini's personal peculiarities would have been too prominent and the universal symbol lost in the individual woman. In the record made by Satish individual peculiarities have become so insignificant that there is no mention of Damini at all. Indeed, it is only through suggestion and subsequent reference that we can be sure that it was Damini whom Satish met in the cave. The cave with its darkness and mystery is just the place where such a meeting should take place, and when we remember that it is in caves that primitive men and women dwelt and that the attraction of the sexes is the most primeval instinct of humanity, the appropriateness of the cave as a venue of the meeting is enhanced. The animal that Satish encounters in this place seems at first to be one with the darkness, but gradually it takes on a distinct appearance. With wonderful art the poet gives it a vague shape in which there is little but a mass of appetite, thus making it at the same time a concrete object and an abstract instinct. This instinct is as primal as life, because it is the reproductive impulse which human intelligence, a later accretion, has not been able either to control or to illuminate. It has no mind, not even eyes and ears, it has only an enormous maw from which man with all his intellectual and emotional power cannot extricate himself. In man's world, this mass of hunger appears in the shape of woman who sobs and weeps but who has a terrible power of sucking and digesting her victim. This power is to be dissociated from woman's beauty and softness, for it is nothing but the instinct of sex which harks back to the dawn of life, which possibly uses beauty and softness as refined weapons of offence. There are one or two delicate but pointed suggestions that this creature is not merely the darkness of the cave, it is not a mass of hunger, not a reptile and not certainly a figment of Satish's overwrought imagination. She is a real woman, a modern woman, she is Damini with her intelligence, her tenderness

and her power of laughter But behind all her gifts of the brain and the heart, she retains—as do all women for men and all men for women—the mindless brainless fascination that has ushered life into the earth

## V

In *The Home and the World*, there is a mixture of two different kinds of fiction, it is a cross between the realistic novel such as *Gora* and the symbolist novel such as *Broken Tiles* It projects the emotional and intellectual reactions of three highly sensitive persons—Nikhil, Bimalâ and Sandip but it relates these reactions to a mighty political event, the *Swadeshi* movement which swept over Bengal like a flood in the early years of the twentieth century Yet the final significance of this novel is more ideological than political or social

—*Swadeshi* started as a political protest against the tyranny of foreign rule in general and the partition of Bengal in particular, it was also an economic movement for the revival of indigenous industries So far it was a peaceful movement for freedom and nationalism but it was mixed up with terroristic activity which aimed at armed revolution It led to the organization of secret societies which used violence, and there were many amongst the enthusiasts who delighted more in the destruction of foreign articles than in manufacturing indigenous goods These destructive and violent activities are probably traceable to some evil impulse in the heart of the agitation which, although inspired by patriotism derived part of its strength from greed and violence

Viewed purely as a political social novel *The Home and the World* seems to make a sharp distinction between these rival impulses, Nikhil representing the pure passion for constructive work in *Swadeshi* and Sandip its greed and destructive energy Nikhil worships nothing but Truth which is greater than the country and which is above all

temporary crazes, for Sandip the success of the moment, no matter by whatever means it is won, is the only thing that matters. For Nikhil the Ideal is the principal ingredient in the Real, for Sandip the Ideal is tolerable only when it is a means to the attainment of the Real. Bimala is torn between these two contending forces which exercise a powerful fascination over her. Nikhil's passion for absolute Truth reminds us of the sages of ancient India, and the dominating force in Sandip's character is greed which is the bane of modern Western nationalism. *The Home and the World* has, therefore, been regarded as an allegory, Bimala standing for modern India, Nikhil for ancient India and Sandip for modern Europe. Such a division is as artificial as the division of a man into component limbs like the hands, the feet, the head and the heart. *Swadeshi* was a totality, its violence and its truth were like the obverse and reverse sides of the same shield. The real meaning of the novel lies, therefore, in the psychological conflict, the personal drama of a husband and a wife knowing each other both at home and in the world. The *Swadeshi* agitation is necessary only because it is through this upheaval that a Bengali wife can suddenly tear herself from the moorings of a sheltered domestic life and float adrift in the high seas of a country wide agitation. The novel is full of political discussions, but these discussions are not like the discussions in modern propagandist novels or dramas, they are important only in so far as they help to reveal the workings in the minds of Nikhil, Sandip and Bimala. Nora and Bimala belong to two different worlds, the former stands for an idea, the latter is an individual woman who may be only distantly connected with an idea.

The real theme of the novel lies in the responsibilities, trials and adjustments which Nikhil has to make as a result of his desire to found his relationship with his wife on truth\*. Marriage is an external bondage, it wants to keep

\* Mr E. M. Forster does less than justice to this novel when he regards it as a variation on the *ménage à trois* theme and calls it a boarding house flirtation.

together two souls who cannot be as much alike each other as two flowers or two tables may be. Sensitive souls both in actual life and in literature have recoiled from the tyranny of this bondage, each in his or her peculiar way. Nikhil has his own method of approach and creates his own problem. He is not a Torvald and does not make a doll of his wife, neither does he try to impose anything of his own on her, and he resists all attempts on her part to make a hero or an idol of him. Rather does he want that she should know the larger world, and it is against the background of this larger world that he wants to test the value of their love and to make their union complete. In a Bengali household, the wife belongs definitely to the home; it is very difficult to give her the freedom that is realized in the outside world. A mighty political agitation that sweeps over the country like a storm and breaks the barriers of ages gives the Indian wife an opportunity of coming out of the seclusion of the home, and this, from the point of view of the plot, is the justification for introducing the *Swadeshi* movement in this story. Not only does she leave the zenana, but her sight and her mind, her hopes and her desires become red with the passion of a new age. And it is at this time that she meets Sandip, a fiery nationalist who thinks and feels differently from her husband.

Sandip is frankly a champion of greed and of the Nietzschean Will to Power. When he adores the country and shouts *Bande Mataram*, he is not prepared to recognize any moral ideal that may stand in the way of immediate success. For him ideals are illusions which may have a practical value if they subserve his ends, but if they serve no such purpose they deserve to be scrapped. Everyman says he has a natural right to possess and therefore greed is natural. Because you have your greed you build your walls. Because I have my greed I break through them. You use your power. I use my craft. These are the realities of life. This is as far from the idealism of Nikhil as the dark moon is from the full. Bimala is fascinated by

Sandip's impetuous vitality beside which her husband's love for truth, eternal and absolute, seems to be very thin. Her burning devotion to her country is mixed up with her attraction for the country's hero, Sandip, who flatters her as the incarnation of *Shakti*, the goddess from whom the sons of Bengal will derive inspiration and energy. For Sandip, too, zeal for the country is soon transformed into love for a woman; Hail Mother easily slides into Hail Enchantress. Although Bimala and Sandip are drawn towards each other by what seems to be an insuperable attraction, the adulterous impulse is soon checked. Bimala discovers that behind the sparkle of Sandip's brilliance there is the slime of weakness, cowardice and meanness, and she recoils in disgust. Sandip, too, realizes that it is easier to dismiss moral scruples in talk than in actual life. When his hypnotizing of Bimala is almost complete, when she has all but surrendered herself to him, it is he who fails to make good his conquest. What stands in the way? Nothing external, no objective reality, but some hidden element in his own nature, "a tangle of a multitude of things,—nothing definitely palpable, but only that unaccountable sense of obstruction".

The problem of Nikhil and Bimala is deeper than that of Sandip and Bimala. Nikhil has been married to Bimala for nine years, and during these nine years he has been the best of husbands. He has been a good husband not simply in the sense that he has been faithful and kind to her; he has never tried to impose on Bimala the superiority which from time immemorial the stronger sex has claimed over the weaker; rather he has always tried to make Bimala grow in her own way. Yet at the first tidal wave from the outside world which comes in the shape of *Swadeshi* and Sandip, Bimala is swept off her feet, and but for that mysterious obstruction in Sandip's own soul to which reference has already been made, she might have lost herself irrevocably. Are we to believe that Bimala's lapse is a biological necessity, that the monogamous ideal of marriage

is a fiction and that woman is by nature polyandrous just as man may be by nature polygamous? Or are we to view the whole tangle on the emotional rather than the biological plane? Or does marriage inevitably mean the oppression of one partner by another so that Nikhil has indeed been a tyrant, although he has consciously tried to avoid being one? Or has there been a fundamental misalliance which years of mutual devotion and trust have not been able to remove? Sandip, a keen observer and analyst, makes the following significant comment: "How little these two persons, who have been together, day and night, for nine years, know of each other! They know something perhaps of their home life, but when it comes to outside concerns they are entirely at sea. They had cherished the belief that the harmony of the home with the outside was perfect. To-day they realize to their cost that it is too late to repair their neglect of years, and seek to harmonize them now." Although Bimala does not complain openly, Nikhil fears that he might have acted as a fetter round her, and that is why when the tension between them becomes acute, he tells her that she is free, for he does not want to keep her as a garland round his neck, which would mean keeping a weight over his heart. It is also significant that in the crisis of his life, he hears the true voice of home, not from Bimala but from his sister-in-law who was his playmate in boyhood and is now his friend. Could she have felt the same sympathy if she had been his wife? Or in other words, is the rift which yawns between Nikhil and Bimala caused by their personal limitations or is it an unavoidable legacy of marriage?

These and many other questions are subtly suggested by the Nikhil—Bimala—Sandip tangle and the participants are allowed to tell their own tale. But it must be admitted that the portraiture is not as thorough as the reader might expect; the suggestions are not pursued to their most delicate filament, and on one fundamental matter the author substitutes melodrama for real psychological conflict. Dr



Banerjee points out that it does not take long to see through Sandip's mask and that as a man he is not equal to Nikhil who, with all his modesty, is quite alive to the difference between himself and his rival and friend. That is why Bimala's revulsion against Sandip is so easy and so swift. The conflict in Bimala's soul and also in Nikhil's would have been really tense if the fascination exercised by Sandip had been reinforced by real strength of character, if, in every respect, he could have been a match for Nikhil. The sociological problem also would then have become really acute, and we should have been set thinking about the basic implications of marriage. If Sandip had been as manly and noble as Nikhil, then we could have realized how far marriage is a help to the development of personality and how far a hindrance.

A word has to be said, too, about the technique adopted in this novel. It is a string of monologues, the three characters giving their own versions of the incidents in the story. This technique which is not altogether novel in Bengali fiction—it was employed by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in *Rajani*—has its advantages in a novel like *The Home and the World* which relies less on plot than on intimate psychological study and which lays emphasis on a full portraiture of a few characters rather than on giving vignettes of a large number of them. But there is one defect; the characters have to be so intensely self-conscious that they cannot reveal themselves in sudden, absent-minded spurts of thought, speech and action. This defect becomes particularly glaring in Bimala who, we are to suppose, was drawn to Sandip, half-unconsciously at first. But she seems to write out her story when the fascination is at an end, and she only partly succeeds in recapturing her first fine careless rapture. If the author had written a drama on this theme, the contradictory impulses in her might have been portrayed through actions which speak for themselves, and her speeches would have been related intimately to her feelings as these were generated from moment to moment. If in the novel, she could

be viewed through the eyes of her creator rather than through her own eyes, the conflict between the warring emotions in her soul would have been set in its proper perspective. As it is, we see too much of a part of her character and too little of the remainder. "There must," says Bimala, 'be two different persons inside men. One of these in me can understand that Sandip is trying to delude me; the other is content to be deluded.' "I cannot but feel, again and again," she says, on another occasion, "that there are two persons in me. One recoils from Sandip in his terrible aspect of chaos,—the other feels that very vision to be sweetly alluring." As it is the disillusioned Bimala who tells her story—and the same story cannot be told by two halves of one person—we get a partial and prejudiced picture of the woman who was fascinated by Sandip. It seems that the portraiture would have been fuller, if the author had adopted the more orthodox method of fiction and presented Bimala as he saw her, it would have been better, too, if he had abjured the hybrid form of monologue and made his work a regular drama, we should then have been able to get a completer portrait of Bimala, the central character of the novel.

## VI

Of the five novels considered in this chapter *Two Sisters* is the latest, and it is also the weakest of them all. This short novel—it is about a hundred pages in length—shows the weaknesses inherent in the technique adopted by Rabindranath in his later fiction. It has four chapters and four characters, but Nirod is, more or less, supernumerary, and Sasanka, although necessary, is a secondary character who only enables the two sisters to reveal their peculiarities. Even the two sisters are not complete portraits, being representatives of two opposed aspects of womanhood, one of the "mother kind" and the other of the "beloved kind." Thus

the portraiture is allegorical and general rather than personal.

It cannot be said that there is anything wrong if an artist tries to depict symbols and allegories rather than individuals. An artist communicates his sense of value; the sense is his own, but it is derived from observation of others and is meant for a multitude of readers. This gives a work its universality, and values are general and abstract rather than particular and concrete. But a work of art is primarily a creation, and the first condition to be fulfilled by a creative work is that it must be endowed with individual life. The ordinary, non-symbolical work of art starts with particular, personal traits and then reaches forward to the universal whereas an allegorical-symbolical work proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, from the general to the particular. In thus endowing an abstract idea with individuality the artist must see that the central idea becomes a vital part of a total personality; it must absorb and illuminate all the other characteristics of the person in whom it is prominently displayed. It should be connected with other traits, and what is more important, it should itself be free. That is to say, it must follow its own line of development and be subject to no law from the outside; this is the distinction between what is vital and what is mechanical. These features which distinguish living from wooden art are absent from *Two Sisters*. Sarmila and Urmimala are different from each other; the one is of the mother-kind and the other of the beloved-kind, but neither of them has a fully developed personality of her own, and for lack of this personality, even the one idea which is represented in either of them is ineffectively portrayed.

Sarmila is intended to represent motherliness; by untiring labour and unfailing vigilance she brings up her husband as if he were a baby. She never obtrudes herself into his work, never demands anything from him; her only care is to see that he has not to worry about anything, that he is supplied with everything he wants and at the right

moment and that he is adequately attended upon when there is the least possibility of his falling ill. She is compared to the rainy season which showers blessings, but as she is represented merely as a personification of the spirit of service, her life turns into a mere round of duties which seem to be performed in a mechanical manner, we never feel the pulse of the clockmaker behind the clock work. It is clear, however, that in spite of all that she does for her husband, she cannot enter into her husband's life, and this she cannot do because she has little vitality of her own. He accepts money from her but repays it with interest, he makes a doll of her by trying to please her with mechanical toys but he sternly protests when she tries to make a doll of him on festive occasions. She has showered gifts on him but has not been able to enrich his life as the rainy season enriches the earth, neither has she the fulness which is the chief characteristic of the rains. It is only natural that he should be glad to take a holiday from this dreary life in which there is no lack of conveniences and comforts but in which he has never felt the warm thrill of emotion which haunts, startles and waylays. And this thrill he feels when Urmī comes to nurse her sister and begins to play the housewife in his home.

But is Urmī a true representative of the beloved kind a symbol of womanly enchantment? She seems to have more of the listlessness of the spring wind than of spring's richness and grandeur. She was tied to a round of mechanical duties by the bookful blockhead Nirod who could not awaken in her the passion of love. In the fascination she and Sasanka arouse in each other, both seem to be enjoying a holiday from the dull routine of work and from a life of duty in which there was no room for passion. The affair of Sasanka and Urmī is marked by a spirit of levity and shows very little of real emotional excitement. Sarmila is willing to accept Urmī as a co-wife, her motherliness gets the better of jealousy, but Urmī recoils from the complication she has herself created. She instinctively realizes that

the storm she has raised in her sister's conjugal life is a passing squall, and leaving them to readjust themselves to each other, she goes to England to pursue her studies there. There is nothing in all that she does in Sasanka's company to suggest that she was seriously in love with him. It is, indeed, true that Sasanka is in a frenzy; he neglects his wife and spoils his work. He goes to excursions with Urmi when he should be minding his office and his clients, and he indulges in frivolities with her when he should be tending his wife. But this seems to be a passing phase; there is little evidence that he is in the grip of a deadly passion. Indeed, the proof of his fascination for Urmi is supplied more by what he should have done and does not do than by what he actually does. The author imagines a situation which, he himself admits, is not very new, and he fails to draw out all its possibilities. He seems to be too indolent to trace passion to its deepest roots and is content to illustrate a formula rather than create living characters who always enrich and transcend the abstract ideas they may have been intended to represent.

## CHAPTER XII

### CONCLUSION

#### I

During more than half a century of incessant creative activity Rabindranath produced about a hundred short stories, a large number of plays and playlets, a dozen novels, and as regards his poems, their name is legion. It will not be possible to mention many writers whose output is equally large. Yet it has to be remembered that he conquered the Western world and wrested the Nobel Prize on the strength of a modest volume containing only one hundred and three short prose poems. Readers whose appreciation was reflected in the judgment of the Swedish Academy had little idea of the enormous quantity of his work and must have been entranced by the extraordinary literary beauty of the *Song Offerings* presented to them. The English translations in *Gitanjali* and some other books such as *The Gardener* and *Fruit Gathering* are not mere translations, they are recreations in an alien medium of thoughts and emotions that were first expressed in the poet's native tongue. Marvellous as the literary beauty of these translations is, it is not mere technical craftsmanship that won him fame. As C. F. Andrews has pointed out, many of his warmest admirers have been amongst people who have studied him only through the imperfect medium of translations from the English versions of his works. "Very few books" says Andrews "have been able to bear the strain of such a severe test of double translation."

There must, therefore, be something in his poetry which is so universal and so profound that it can easily transcend the barriers of distance, of difference in language and culture. Most Western admirers trace this power to

an elemental simplicity, an innocence or spontaneity which makes his poetry 'appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes" But his Eastern admirers are struck chiefly by the intricate artistry and richness of his poems and the innocence, the spontaneity or the simplicity which has been so much admired seems itself to be an effect of something more fundamental. Most Western critics find the root of this extraordinary beauty in a strange harmony between emotion and idea or between poetry and religion. Reviewing *Gitanjali*, *The Times Literary Supplement* said (November 7, 1912)

'The chief cause of decadence in any art is impoverishment of subject matter, and poetry is always liable to this impoverishment when it has not enough intellectual power to pass from its primitive stage of dealing with the particular to the task of dealing with the general. Poetry must conquer the province of ideas if it is not to be subdued by them into prose. It must learn to express the emotions stirred by ideas as it has in the past expressed the emotions stirred by facts, and in doing so it must remain poetry with the old music, imagery and unhesitating sense of values. That is the problem which troubles our poetry at present and seems to endanger its very existence, and it is no wonder that Mr Yeats should hail with delight the work of an Indian poet who seems to solve it as easily as it was solved in Chinese painting of a thousand years ago.

Mr Tagore has translated his poems into English prose, simple and often half-rhythmical, so that their sense is not obscured by an obvious inadequacy of language, and in reading them one feels not that they are curiosities of an alien mind, but that they are prophetic of the poetry that might be written in England if our poets could attain to the same harmony of emotion and idea.

The above is typical of the West's first reaction to this poetry, so abundant, so spontaneous and yet so daring. To us who have lived in intimate contact with the culture Tagore has created, the secret of his greatness lies in a sense

of completeness, in a peculiar combination of sensuousness and mysticism. No poet has written more exuberantly of the beauties of nature, of flowers and fruits, changes of seasons, the heavy Indian rain in particular, of rivers oceans and skies. Yet as Mr Fausset points out, the note of hedonism never sounds in his poetry. Here the richest description of nature suggests that there is something beyond nature, and yet the external beauty of nature is not a mere vesture or a shadow, it is not even simply the expression of a divine inner spirit, rather may it be said that the divine spirit completes itself in its manifestation in visible sights or audible sounds. Tagore has written about the most trivial thing in life and the most common place object in nature but around these there has always hung an atmosphere of wonder because these have been connected with some super sensuous mystery and have not yet lost any part of their commonplaceness or triviality. He has written passionately of human love, but it is fundamentally different from the poetry of love written by other poets. One feels that the sweetheart who is wooed is at the same time of the world and not of it. It may be complained that such poetry of love must be lacking in that passionate intensity which is inalienable from erotic poetry but one has only to read these poems of love to see how false this supposition would be. There is no lack of intensity, but the intensity is distinctive of his attitude to life which looks upon the meeting of lovers as only a part of that process of perfection by means of which the human consciousness expands itself in a super personal world. Mr E. M. Forster rightly deprecates attempts made by critics to find allegorical meanings in *Chitra* which is a drama of sensuous human passion. But one reason why critics have been tempted to find allegory in this poem of earthly love is that even in the most extravagant outbursts of passion Arjuna seems to feel that his love is incomplete in itself and that it is constantly pointing towards something beyond mere emotional ecstasy. *Chitra* knows that her beauty and



the love she enjoys are gifts of gods, and both Arjuna and Chitra realize the fulness of love in the birth of their child.

It is this sense of completeness that distinguishes Rabindranath's poetry from the Bible and the songs of Kabir which are supposed to have influenced him. In a depreciatory notice in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, George Sampson says that "it is difficult to find in his numerous volumes anything richer in thought and expression than the pages of the English Bible afford to the receptive reader." "Many of his Western readers," says Thompson, "practically ceased their reading of him with his fine translation of Kabir. This was perhaps because they found in that nobly virile poet, set forth with a greater sincerity than we can achieve today, many of the similes that seemed to be Rabindranath's stock in trade. If there is one thing which the Bible emphasizes, it is the worthlessness of earthly joys and the necessity of laying by treasures for heaven. Although there are, here and there, beautiful passages of natural description, the total impression is one of opposition between earth and heaven, between nature and supernature, but in Rabindranath the insistence is always on heaven perfecting itself through its manifestation on the earth as the earth is constantly reaching forward to heaven. It is, indeed, true that this idea he shares with Kabir who sings 'If God be within the mosque, then to whom does the world belong?' It is also true that Kabir anticipates him in many of his favourite images—his lamps and flutes, his dances and lotuses, as Thompson enumerates them, but great as Kabir's poems are, they do not produce the same impression of rounded perfection, of harmony between heaven and earth, between forms and formlessness that is the principal feature of Rabindranath's poetry nor has Kabir the richness, peace and poise of Rabindranath. If we compare two poems on similar themes written by these poets we shall find a contrast between rugged strength and simplicity on the one hand and delicate grace and richness on the other. Says Kabir

"The *Yogi* dyes his garments, instead of dyeing his mind in the colours of love

\*            \*            \*

He pierces holes in his ears, he has a great beard and matted locks, he looks like a goat

\*            \*            \*

You are going to the doors of death, bound hand and foot "

(*One Hundred Poems of Kabir—LXVI*)

With this may be compared *no 11* of *Gitanjali*

"Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy god is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil

\*            \*            \*

Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense!

What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?

Meet him and stand by him in toil and in the sweat of thy brow "

## II

The sense of unity and harmony between detached things in nature, between man and nature, between the created world and the Creator, between what Dr Cousins described as "two attitudes to life that are as different as a

cyclone and an anti cyclone, the one drawing everything to itself and producing a condition of turmoil and egotism the other giving everything away, and the great calm of self surmounted'—this is what gives Rabindranath's poetry its grace and richness and abundance. But is this abundance an unmixed good? Thompson thinks that there is in him a certain mental laziness which, not unoften, makes his poetry unnecessarily prolix and decorative. It seems, on this view, that 'he plays too much with externals with ornamentation'. Mr Fausset goes deeper into the matter and puts forward this charge in a different way. 'But clearly as he conceived the necessity of 'redeeming the contraries' in theory, he achieved it with difficulty in practice, the more so, perhaps, because there was no deep seated conflict in his nature. The harp was not tightly strung. And it was in making the infinite sufficiently finite or rather in maintaining as only the imagination can do the significant tension between them, that he failed most frequently as a writer.'

It is incorrect to suggest that Rabindranath plays with externals, with ornamentation for love for ornamentation is a part of his view of life, if the decoration were removed the poetry would vanish, too. In many of the English translations, he himself tried to prune his poems, but much of the poetry has gone out of these truncated versions. If the English *Gitanjali* has a "trance-like beauty", it is not because the luxuriances in the Bengali originals have been lopped off but because the English versions are almost original creations which have sometimes replaced old beauties with new. It is not also possible to agree with Mr Fausset when he says that Rabindranath could not make the infinite sufficiently finite, because it is exactly in giving a human, concrete picture of the infinite that the appeal of his poetry lies. 'A mystic?' asked a reviewer in *The Manchester Guardian* writing on *The King of the Dark Chamber*, What kind of mystic is this who hymns the passion of love, youth motherhood, in an ecstasy of the

senses?" But Mr Fausset is right when he says that there was a lack of any severe conflict in his nature and that is because he had an imperfect sense of evil. This is the reason why his poetry is so abundantly mellifluous, why he seems always to be ready to float in a stream of beauty, why his meaning is often overburdened with a wealth of decoration. As has been pointed out by Dr Urquhart, he did not sufficiently realize the necessity of cutting off the offending right hand (*The International Journal of Ethics*)

This fundamental limitation in Rabindranath has to be examined in greater detail. His love for completeness made him look upon evil not as a negation of good but as an imperfection which is only perfection revealed within bounds. With a characteristically Eastern attitude, he regards it as a bondage which he poetically compared to banks enclosing the current of a river. If deliverance is to be sought, it must not be by breaking the bondage but by realizing the potentiality for perfection inherent in it. But this ignores the destructive, negative side of evil and circumscribes Rabindranath's view of life, which is otherwise so expansive. When Othello sees his journey's end and cries,

"Who can control his fate?"

or when King Lear exclaims in the midst of a storm

'And thou, all shaking thunder

Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!

Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once

That make ingrateful man

Shakespeare envisages evil as a terrible and mysterious curse which blasts life, but of this form of evil Rabindranath, who looked upon pain as a "vestal virgin consecrated to the service of the immortal perfection", had no conception. "He is India", said Johan Bojer "bringing to Europe a new divine symbol, not the Cross but the Lotus." If the new symbol has its beauty, it has also its limitations. In the multitude of poems, stories and dramas he has written,

he has not been able to draw any picture of evil that is dark and malignant. The nearest approach is Sandip who is a representation of the rapacious side of modern civilization but whom Mr E. M. Forster calls a "West Kensingtonian Babu". Even if Mr Forster's description may be brushed aside as an obvious caricature, the fact remains that Sandip is worlds apart from Edmund and Iago. If there were no darkness, light would be too radiant; and just because Rabindranath had an imperfect knowledge of the bitter side of life, his poetry is occasionally "lost in a mist of vague sweetness." This, again, is the reason why he succeeded much better as lyric poet or as writer of short stories than as novelist or dramatist. A dramatist must be able to portray the conflict between opposing forces which may, for the sake of convenience, be termed as those of good and evil, and a novelist must firmly grasp reality which includes not only beauty but also ugliness which is the negation of beauty. And this is what Rabindranath, with his peculiar view of life, could not do.

Yet after all that may be put to the debit side, the fact remains that he is one of the greatest poets of all times and one of the most significant figures in the modern world. In Eastern civilization, he found a desire to escape from life, to dismiss the world as illusion. He tried to make his own countrymen face facts and realize that even illusion is true as illusion; he refused to shut the doors of his senses, because "man's delights of sights and hearing and touch would bear God's delight. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust." In the West he found a manly adventuring for the conquest of nature and for the liquidation of poverty, disease and squalor. But he found, too, that this civilization is based on science which measures reality quantitatively and divides it into ever smaller and smaller fractions. In such a civilization there is little room for the development of man's personality which is the sense of unity in one's own self and yet finds its real truth in its relationship with others. Rabindranath

foresaw that this civilization which had set greed above peace, piling up of wealth above the conquest of happiness, was heading towards its doom. While science was proceeding to the splitting of the atom, he held forth the ideal of wholeness and completeness and preached the truth and value of undivided human personality, of the unity of man, Nature and God. To men of all countries and for men of all ages, he has sung, as no other poet has done, of the joy of life and of the wonder and beauty of the world, of humanity in God and of divinity in man. To the present age of frayed nerves and confused ideologies he has preached, through the innumerable creations of his imagination, a message which is as profound as it is simple.

"That I exist is a perpetual surprise which is life."

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